

Table of Contents

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO VERSUS THE "WONDERFUL" WIZARD

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO, WARLORD OF MARS

THE WHOLE SPECKLED BAND CLUSTERF*CK

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES BELOW

Author's note
About the authors
More from Matt Youngmark



THE ARABELLA GRIMSBRO COLLECTION:

The "Wonderful" Wizard of Futhermucking Oz Arabella Grimsbro, Warlord of Mars The Whole Speckled Band Clusterf*ck Arabella Grimsbro Twenty Thousand Leagues Below

Copyright © 2017-2019 by Matt Youngmark.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

(Except for, you know, the parts that are public domain?)

First edition, July 2020



The Atherton Haight logo is registered trademark of Atherton Haight.

www.youngmark.com

Cover illustrations by Mona Finden

Copyright page illustration by W.W. Denslow

Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication Data is available on request.

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO

"Wonderful"

WIZARD

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS

THE "WONDERFUL" WIZARD OF FUTHERMUCKING OZ

MATT YOUNGMARK AND THAT, L. FRANK BAUM



ATHERTON HAIGHT, SEATTLE



DAWN MARIE PARES.

Once again, forever, always.
I wouldn't even be someone who could write this book without you.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

Arabella Grimsbro curses like a longshoreman. After careful consideration, we have decided that altering her language, as profane as it may be, would irreparably damage both the tone of her prose, and, in some cases, its very meaning.

If you are considering purchasing this book for a child, please be aware that, among other obscenities, it features some variant of the word "fuck" eighty-seven times.

(Eighty-eight if you include the editor's note.)

INTRODUCTION.

In L. Frank Baum's intro to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he claimed his goal was to write a fairy tale without the violence and endless moralizing of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm (he also, for the record, called children "youngsters," and stated that his goal was "to pleasure" them, but whatever).

If that's true, I'd say he sucked at his job, because that book contains some *fucked up shit*.

I often wonder what my life would have been like if I'd had the good sense to stay the hell away from a place called Voyages Through Literature, or skipped the godforsaken mall altogether, and told Madeline she could deal with her stupid crush on her own. In the end, though, I suppose you could say the decision was mine. I personally selected *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* from a list of truly awful-sounding public domain classics, clicked "yes" to agree to whatever the terms and conditions were, and stepped into that tacky neon booth of my own free will. But, in my defense, they offered me money. It was clearly entrapment, and you bet your sweet ass that if I can ever prove that the store actually exists—if it isn't some portal to an alternate dimension or my own brain finally severing all ties to reality—I fully intend to sue.

My name is Arabella Grimsbro, and this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

CHAPTER I.

THE CYCLONE.

First off, I'd like to make it clear that I've never even been to Kansas. When you find yourself in a situation as batshit crazy as I did, you kind of roll with it, which I guess is why I brought Kansas up to begin with. For me, every time I said "Kansas," or someone repeated it back to me, it just kind of meant "reality in general." Or, specifically, Calabasas, California, where I lived in a perfectly normal apartment with my Mom.

My Mom is the coolest, smartest, and honest-to-God most beautiful human being I've ever known. She was born in Peru, looks like a straight-up runway model, and will absolutely punch you in the face if you piss her off. She's usually working some kind of boring office job, but what she really is, deep down in her soul, is an *entrepreneur*. She just hasn't quite gotten any of her business ideas up and running yet. I inherited some of her smarts, all of her ADD, and, despite what she'll tell you, exactly none of her good looks. In terms of hotness (or lack thereof) I take after my Dad, who is your standard-issue generic pan-European white guy mutt. The truth is, I don't really know that much about him.

And before you start speculating that my Dad is a Secret Fairy Prince from a Faraway Magical Land, he's not. He's just some schmo. He used to sell cars, and now he sells syndicated television shows to local affiliate stations. Which I guess is a decent living, because to whatever extent broadcast TV still exists, they still need to fill interminable hours with reruns of *The Ghost Whisperer* or whatever. He lives, like, barely half an hour away in Studio City, but I never see him.

Anyway, this book isn't about them. It's about lions and scarecrows and that fucking asshole wizard, and it begins, of all places, at the mall.

The reason I even went to the stupid mall that day was because Madeline needed moral support. There are exactly three lesbians in our entire high school, and my friend Madeline and her hopeless crush, Amber Maldonado, are two of them. When Amber Maldonado snaps, Madeline comes running. It's not that their whole deal threatens our friendship or anything like that—I have my crushes, too. It's just that I acknowledge that Peter Zamora is a sneering, petulant twit who just happens to look *amazing* in a black peacoat. Madeline, on the other hand, keeps insisting that Amber Maldonado actually has a single redeeming quality.

Amber asked Madeline to join her at the mall with her equally horrible group of friends, and Madeline asked me to come along, because the prospect thrilled and terrified her in equal measure. Only she didn't want me with her with her—as I said, Amber and her crowd are the literal spawn of Satan, and I'm happy to say that to their faces—so we agreed to meet at the vibrating massage chairs by the food court when she texted me in tears that the whole thing had fallen apart in whatever spectacular way it inevitably would.

So there I was, limbs splayed across a currently motionless vibrating chair, scrolling through what I didn't even know were probably the LAST TUMBLR POSTS I WOULD EVER SEE, when I noticed the sign. I'm about 90 percent sure the place used to be a Build-A-Bear Workshop, but it apparently went out of business (possibly because why, in all of recorded history, would anybody want to *build a bear*). Now it was something called Voyages Through Literature, which looked like the type of wholesome, educational crap that would be boarded up and replaced with a Hot Dog on a Stick inside of three months.

Oh my god—junk food. It's been *so long*. I could tear through a hot dog on a stick like a school of piranha skeletonizing a cow right now. You don't even *know*.

The place didn't even seem to have any actual books in it, just various screens displaying videos... *about* books? I'm certain that I would have never set foot inside it, except some beleaguered dad plopped his screaming toddler down on the chair next to me in an attempt to reattach a shoe or something, and my peaceful, non-vibrating solitude was shattered. At least the abandoned video book store looked quiet.

Alas, the woman behind the counter pounced on me the moment I entered. She was maybe forty-ish, with 1950s cat-eye glasses, curves bursting out all over the place, and a red dye job in some kind of weirdly complicated up-do. Her smile was wide, but felt pretty mandatory.

"Welcome to Voyages Through Literature!" she said with more than a hint of desperation. "Where can we transport you to today? Nineteenth-century England The frozen wilds of the Canadian wilderness? A pirate frigate adventuring on the high seas?"

"How about the 74th annual Hunger Games," I said noncommittally, tapping on one of the touch screen kiosks. "I could do some fucking *damage* with a composite bow."

"Um, I don't think we have that one," she said. "But if it's action you're looking for, perhaps Alexandre Dumas's timeless classic, *The Three Musketeers*?"

Swiping through the selections, it quickly became clear that the shop didn't carry a single book that had been published within the past eighty years. *Robinson Crusoe? Ivanhoe?* Whatever the hell a *Scarlet Pimpernel* was? A better name for the place would have been Voyages Through Public Domain Books That Are So Old Nobody Owns the Copyright Anymore So We Don't Have to Pay a Licensing Fee.

"You know what? I'm good."

"Are you sure?" the woman said. "It's a *total immersion* experience. You'll swear that you were actually there!"

Actually *where*? Some sweaty old playwright's creepy imagination? "Yeah, I'm supposed to meet my friend..."

"Listen, we're still in the market research phase," she said. And this is the part where I should have realized that she was *way* too desperate. "If you're willing to fill out a brief survey about your voyage, we can offer you \$20 for your trouble."

I looked at my phone—Madeline hadn't texted. For all I knew, it could be hours before she did. And you know, twenty bucks is twenty bucks. At the very least, filling out the form would probably be good for a few laughs. What the hell, I figured.

What the hell.

I continued browsing through their selection—there was a lot of stuff I'd never heard of, and most of what I had didn't sound particularly appealing. The thought of being totally immersed in a Charles Dickens novel sounded like actual punishment, and ugh, *definitely* nothing by Jane Austen. I almost settled on something called *A Princess of Mars*, because that sounded like a pretty messed-up fairy tale. But then I saw it. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum. I had seen the movie a bunch

of times—my Mom and I used to watch it together about once a year, like a special occasion. When I was *really* little it genuinely scared me, and even as I got older, the over-the-top campiness and weird sincerity of the whole thing still held a secret, special place in my heart.

So I figured I could kill some time on the Yellow Brick Road. At the very least, I'd know the songs. I made my selection on the screen, then scrolled down through eight or ten pages of miniscule text and clicked "accept" on the terms and conditions (I can't even *imagine* what was actually in there).

"So, is there a headset or something?" I asked the saleslady. "Is this like an Oculus Rift kind of thing?"

"Just step inside the booth, sweetie," she said. "We'll take care of everything." Her expression had changed subtly, with eyes slightly wider, smile just a tad more forced. I suppose this should have been another warning sign, but whatever. Old people are weird. The booth itself was built into the back wall of the shop, and plastered with brightly lit exclamations. WONDER! ADVENTURE! I swear to god, one of them said EDUTAINMENT! It looked exactly like the kind of door you'd build if you were trying to lure children inside to harvest their organs (in retrospect, *I wish*).

Inside, it was so dark I couldn't even tell how big it was. I reached out my hands for the back wall, but found nothing. "Safe travels," the saleslady said softly as she closed the door behind me.

And, just like that, I was engulfed in darkness.

We didn't have *cyclones* in Southern California, but we did have earthquakes, so when the floor suddenly lurched beneath my feet, that's what I assumed was happening. *Oh my god*, I thought, *this is how I'm going to die. Trapped under a collapsed ceiling in the back room of a mall shop that I'd be embarrassed to be found dead in, before they can even harvest my organs.* Then the room was spinning, and I lost my balance. Somewhere, a little yappy dog barked.

To this day, I maintain that I did not faint. I hit my fucking head or something.

Either way, though, I was out like a light.

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNCIL WITH THE MUNCHKINS.

I was awakened with a shock, so sudden and severe that if I had not been lying on a soft bed (somehow?) I probably would have banged my head and knocked out a goddamn tooth or something. First off, there was a gross, wet dog nose in my face, whimpering.

Holy shit. "Toto?"

Sure enough, the dog leapt off the bed, hopped up and down on the dirty wooden floorboards, and barked. It was a small black terrier, and looked *exactly* like the dog from the movie. I started to remember where I was—or, at least, where I was *supposed to be*—but having an actual dog in the room with me seemed over the top. I mean, *whose dog was it*? Did the saleslady take it with her to work every day, just in case somebody chose *The Wizard of Oz*? What kind of livestock did she have back there for the sorry sons of bitches who picked *The Jungle Book*?

I clawed at my face briefly, but there was no virtual reality headset or anything. Apparently, the dog really was there. The inside of the EDUTAINMENT! booth turned out to be a dingy room done up like a wooden farmhouse with two beds (*bow-chicka-wow-wow*), a rusty wooden stove, and not much else. At least it was bright now, with what looked like sunlight flooding the room through a small window. I walked slowly over to it, with Toto yipping at my heels the entire way.

The window showed a surprisingly realistic, overwhelmingly colorful nature scene, complete with green hills, lush trees swaying in the breeze, a babbling brook—the whole deal. So, a video screen to watch the story through, built into a generic, dingy room that could be in just about any book written a million years ago. The setup was actually somewhat

charming in its way, I had to admit, but it was hardly "total immersion." That was the second criticism I'd put down on my \$20 market research form, I decided, right after KNOCKING ME OUT AND ALMOST KILLING ME.

I'm not even sure what I thought when I opened the door expecting the interior of the mall, only to discover more majestic wildlife. Before I could even marvel at the scope of it all—seriously, it was a 360 degree, panoramic view, I didn't even know they made video screens that big—I noticed a group of weird little people approaching.

And by little people, I mean like human beings with dwarfism. They were roughly as tall as your average ten-year-old, three men dressed all in blue from their pointy hats to their polished boots, and a little old lady in a sparkly, pleated dress. The men stopped short and looked a bit scared of me, but the woman marched right up close.

"You are welcome, most noble Sorceress, to the land of the Munchkins," she said in a sickly-sweet old lady voice. "We are so grateful to you for having killed the Wicked Witch of the East, and for setting our people free from bondage."

"Oh, shit," I said. "We're actually doing this. Are you people *actors*? Do they hire *actors* for this?"

It didn't make any sense. A dog was one thing, but how many public domain books could possibly have *little people* in them, that they would have *four little people actors just hanging around on call*?

Or did they *specifically knock me out so they could call the casting agency and set all this up*? Jesus, how long had I been unconscious?

The old woman basically ignored me and continued her speech. "Or your house did, anyway," she said, "and that is the same thing." She pointed to the corner of the house behind me. "See! There are her two feet, still sticking out from under a block of wood."

I turned to look, and actually screamed. Just as she had said, two feet were sticking out from beneath the house. The shoes on them were silver rather than sparkly red like the ones I remembered from the movie. But what really shocked me was *all the blood*. Blood was everywhere. And, like, *sinews and stuff*. Pretty much what you'd expect to see, I guess, if an *actual person* had been crushed to death by a falling domicile.

"What kind of fucked up *Wizard of Oz* snuff flick is this? Do you let *children* come in here?"

"She was the Wicked Witch of the East," the old woman said calmly. "She has held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day. Now they are all set free, and are grateful to you for the favor."

"Right," I said, regaining a bit of my composure. "Of course. You're a Munchkin."

"No, but I am their friend, although I live in the land of the North," she said. "When they saw the Witch of the East was dead, the Munchkins sent a swift messenger to me, and I came at once. I am the Witch of the North."

Hmm. Maybe the casting agency was short on 1930s glamor-types, but had plenty of extra little folks. At least it subverted the whole good-witchesare-beautiful, evil-witchesare-hideous-crones trope. This woman was *not* cute.

"Look, I get that you went to a lot of trouble for this," I said. "And hopefully you'll still get paid. But seriously, get that saleslady back in here. I'm done."

"Who is the saleslady?" inquired the old woman.

"Enough! The saleslady! At the crappy video book store, in the mall!" I made a complete circuit, walking all the way around the crashed farmhouse, and didn't see an exit door anywhere. How big was this place? Could it all be behind the storefront? Holy shit, had they *transported me to a second location*?

The Witch of the North seemed to think for a time, with her head bowed and her eyes on the ground. Then she looked up and said, "I do not know where The Mall is, for I have never heard that country mentioned before. But tell me, is it a civilized country?"

"Jesus Christ."

"In the civilized countries, I believe there are no witches left, nor wizards, nor sorceresses, nor magicians," she continued. "But, you see, the Land of Oz has never been civilized, for we are cut off from all the rest of the world. Therefore we still have witches and wizards amongst us."

"You're going to make me go see the motherfucking wizard, aren't you."

"You know of Oz, the Great Wizard!" the Witch said. Then she sank her voice to a whisper, like she was scared even to mention him in conversation. "He is more powerful than all the rest of us together! He lives in the City of Emeralds."

I was about to register another complaint, but suddenly one of the Munchkins gave a loud shout. The three of them had been standing there so quietly the whole time that I had assumed they were being paid as extras and weren't allowed to talk.

"What is it?" the old lady asked. Then she looked at the house and started laughing. The feet of the dead witch had disappeared entirely (along with, thankfully, all the blood and gore). Nothing was left but the silver shoes.

"She was so old," explained the Witch of the North, "that she dried up quickly in the sun. That is the end of her. But the silver shoes are yours, and you shall have them to wear." She reached down and picked up the shoes, and after shaking some dust out of them (a nice touch), handed them to me.

"The Witch of the East was proud of those silver shoes," said one of the blue guys. It turned out he had a speaking part after all. Maybe SAG rules were different for back room mall theater productions. "And there is some charm connected with them, but what it is we never knew."

The slippers! Of course! Now I knew how to put an end to this charade. I kicked off my shoes and put them on. They fit surprisingly well, but then again, considering how elaborate this whole thing was, it wouldn't have been that much extra trouble to measure my sneakers while I was unconscious. As soon as they were on, I stood up straight and clicked my heels together three times.

When I opened my mouth to speak, however, no sound would come out. What the fuck? I knew the words well enough. *Everybody* knew the words. I tried again, and my lips moved just as expected, but once again, silence.

I stopped for a moment to think. All of this was clearly from the *Wizard* of *Oz* book, rather than the movie. There was no bustling Munchkin township, or creepy candy union representatives, or elaborate dance number. You'd think the movie would be the one to skimp on all this stuff, since a novel didn't have to pay actors and costume departments and all that, but whatever. The thing was, the book was at least a century old, but the movie hadn't come out until 1939. The movie stuff wasn't in the public domain yet.

Was it possible that I wasn't allowed to mention anything that was still under copyright by MGM? How could they *physically prevent me* from doing so? This was my first hint that I had gotten myself involved with

something much, *much* worse than a goofy-ass hybrid of virtual reality and community theater.

It made the notion of a quick exit all that much more appealing. Perhaps I could paraphrase? "There's no... *location*... that approximates... the *place where you live*?" I clicked my heels again.

Nothing. Of course, if the classic line wasn't from the original text, there must be some other password altogether. Hmm. What would the moral of a hundred-year-old children's book be? "There's no place like eugenics and racism?"

Historical figures from the previous century were *always* into eugenics and racism. If I knew as much about L. Frank Baum then as I do now, I might have said, "There's no place like LITERALLY ADVOCATING GENOCIDE" (it's a real thing, look it up!). Regardless, however, I did not manage to end the simulation, or whatever the hell was going on there. The Munchkins and the old lady just looked at me like I was crazy.

"Fine," I said miserably. "How do I get home?"

The Munchkins and the Witch first looked at one another, and then at me, and then shook their heads.

"At the east, not far from here," said one of the Munchkins who hadn't spoken yet, "there is a great desert, and none could live to cross it."

"It is the same at the south," said the other one. At least they were all getting a line in, which hopefully meant they would be making more than TWENTY FUCKING DOLLARS for suffering through this indignity. "I have been there and seen it. The south is the country of the Quadlings."

"Sure. Quadlings," I said.

"I am told," the original Munchkin who had yelled about the Witch said, "that it is the same at the west. And that country, where the Winkies live, is ruled by the Wicked Witch of the West, who would make you her slave if you passed her way."

"The North is my home," said the old lady, "and at its edge is the same great desert that surrounds this Land of Oz. I'm afraid, my dear, you will have to live with us."

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuk," I moaned. This wasn't like the movie at all. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck."

All this cursing seemed to concern the Munchkin guys, who all pulled out their handkerchiefs and kind of just stood there *fretting*. As for the little old lady, she took off her pointy hat, balanced the end of it on the tip of her

nose, and counted to three.

The hat disappeared, and was replaced with a small chalkboard in the blink of an eye. The whole thing was goofy as hell, but the special effects were *amazing*.

She took the slate off her nose and read it aloud. "Let Dorothy go to the City of Emeralds," she said. "Is your name Dorothy, my dear?"

I sighed. "Absolutely."

"Then you must go to the City of Emeralds. Perhaps Oz will help you."

"Yes! Oz! The wizard! Was I not making myself clear?"

She ignored my tone. "It is exactly in the center of the country, and is ruled by Oz, the Great Wizard I told you of."

"Ugh. Okay."

"You must walk there. It is a long journey, through a country that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes dark and terrible. However, I will use all the magic arts I know of to keep you from harm."

"You're a hundred percent sure that you can't just, like, *teleport* me there?"

"No, I cannot do that," she replied, "but I will give you my kiss, and no one will dare injure a person who has been kissed by the Witch of the North."

"Whoa, whoa." It wasn't that I was freaked out just by the idea of kissing a woman. Madeline and I had actually tried making out once when we were thirteen, just to see if either of us was gay (it didn't do much of anything for me, for the record, but Madeline liked it KIND OF A LOT). Remember, though, this wasn't the overly made-up but vaguely attractive 1930s glamor model Good Witch of the North. This was a wrinkled, gray-haired old lady witch, and I was a *fifteen-year-old girl*. "What *exactly* do you mean by 'give me your kiss'?"

She came close and kissed me gently on the forehead, which, I would later discover, left a round, shining mark.

"The road to the City of Emeralds is paved with yellow brick," said the Witch, "so you cannot miss it. When you get to Oz, do not be afraid of him, but tell your story and ask him to help you. Goodbye, my dear."

The three Munchkins bowed low to her and wished her a pleasant journey, and then just left, walking away through the trees. The Witch gave me a nod, whirled around on her left heel three times, and straight-up disappeared into thin air. Toto started barking like crazy. To be honest, it

freaked me out a bit, too. That didn't seem like an effect you could manage with a community theater actor in the back of a mall store.

What the *fuck* had just happened?

CHAPTER III.

HOW ARABELLA SAVED THE SCARECROW.

Holograms, I decided. It was all done with holograms. Then again, I had definitely felt the old woman's wrinkly lips on my forehead when she'd kissed me. Could they be *robots*? Was it like that one HBO show, with the cowboys? The one I don't watch? Because it looks stupid?

I looked down at the dog. "What do you think, Toto? Are you a *robot*?" Toto barked. Of course, the robot theory couldn't explain the old woman's disappearing act, or that business with her hat turning into a chalkboard. Which left two possibilities, neither of them particularly appealing: some kind of drug-induced hallucination, or, I don't know, the

My belly let out a growl. If the magical land of Oz was all in my head, then my stomach was definitely in on the con. Why didn't I get that damned corn dog? I went back to the shack and rummaged through the cabinets to discover some bread and butter, which beat starving to death, at least. I ate some of it and fed some to the dog. Some nearby trees also had borne a

fucking *Matrix*.

variety of juicy and vaguely delicious-looking fruits, but I wasn't about to take that risk. This place was already proving very different from the movie I'd watched over and over in my youth, and at this point I was about ninety percent sure that random dangling fruit would turn out to be some kind of trap.

I stuffed the rest of the bread into a basket along with my old sneakers—if I had to walk all the way to the City of Emeralds, I wasn't about to do it without magical witch repellent, or whatever it was the shoes did in this story. They were surprisingly comfortable to walk in, too, although they did make an annoying sort of tinkling noise the moment they hit yellow brick.

But it's not like that would get annoying at all, since it was only like a SEVEN-HUNDRED-MILLION-HOUR WALK BEFORE I EVEN GOT OUT OF MUNCHKINLAND.

They don't tell you that in the movie. They just cut straight to the scene with the scarecrow. But I walked and walked and walked, and there were vast expanses of farmland, picturesque as balls, but no scarecrows. Every once in a while I'd pass a domed blue house, and the people inside would come out to stare. I'd be all like, "DO YOU HAVE LIKE A HORSE AND BUGGY OR SOMETHING, I NEED A GODDAMN RIDE," but they'd just wave and bow a lot. Munchkins are super into bowing.

Seriously, though, that road went forever. Somewhere past the eight-hour mark my phone went dead from repeatedly checking the time, and I had a disturbing thought. I hadn't started walking in the middle of a spirally Munchkin town center or anything.

Had I been going the wrong direction down the Yellow Brick Road this entire time?

The movie had made it seem like the whole trip through Oz was like a one-day thing, but apparently that was not the case. Now it was starting to get dark, and I hadn't even stumbled across my first song-and-dance number.

As if on cue, fiddle music erupted from somewhere up the road. I hoped this meant I would finally find that goddamn scarecrow, but it turned out that a particularly wealthy Munchkin was throwing a party to celebrate my unintentional witch murder. His name was Boq, and he owned what was by far the largest tiny blue house I had seen so far. People were dancing and laughing, and at least five Munchkins were playing fiddles. He invited me to join the feast and spend the night.

A big table on the lawn was loaded with pastries and cakes and fruit and nuts and all kinds of amazing-looking food. All I had eaten all day was the bread, and the dog had actually eaten most of it. I was RAVENOUS.

I looked at the food, though, and the overeager Munchkins beckoning me to partake of it. Wasn't there some deal with food in fairy tales? Like, if you eat the food you're stuck there forever, or get turned into a goat or something? The *Wizard of Oz* movie obviously differed quite a bit from the book—for all I knew, that whole don't-eat-magic-fairy-food thing *came* from the literature I was currently voyaging through.

Also, I had been walking all day, and the theory that this whole thing

was some low-rent theater production had been shot to hell within the first couple of miles. I was either being subjected to an elaborate simulation generated by some combination of *Star Trek* technology and hallucinogens, or *I had actually been transported to a magical land*. Either way, there must be secret rules that governed all of this, and I wasn't about to let some fairy lure me into a deadly trap just because I was—

"Oh my God, is that a *meat pie*?"

Fuck it. In retrospect, I'm pretty sure those things had some kind of enchantment on them, too, because I devoured like eight of them and I was still like, "WHERE DO YOU KEEP THE REST OF THE MEAT PIES?"

My Munchkin host just laughed. "You must be a great sorceress," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Because you wear silver shoes and have killed the Wicked Witch," he said. "Besides, you have white in your frock, and only witches and sorceresses wear white."

I was wearing a black hoodie and jeans. "What are you even *talking* about?"

"Your attire," Boq insisted. "It is kind of you to wear that. Blue is the color of the Munchkins, and white is the witch color. So we know you are a friendly witch."

I flipped over the empty silver pie tray and checked myself out in its gleaming surface. Sure enough, staring back at me was a cherubic-looking ten-year-old girl in a blue-and-white checkered dress. Judy Garland was actually around my age when she got the part in *The Wizard of Oz*, but evidently the real Dorothy was quite a bit younger. Also, her face was *slathered* in beef gravy.

Munchkin dancing and fiddle music actually get old pretty quick, so I was ready to retire as soon as the meat-sleepies kicked in. Boq showed me to a cozy room with a bed that was only about a foot too short for me. The mattress was soft, though, and I was exhausted. I slept soundly until morning, with Toto curled up on a little blue rug beside me.

At breakfast I watched a tiny Munchkin baby play with Toto—he was quite the curiosity, since I guess they don't have dogs in Oz. I was pretty sure that kid was going to get herself bitten, too, because she kept yanking the dog's tail, but Toto seemed to have far more patience with this whole thing than I did.

"So, like, how *far* is the Emerald City?" I asked.

"I do not know," Boq answered gravely, "for I have never been there. It is better for people to keep away from Oz, unless they have business with him. But it is a long way, and it will take you many days. The country here is rich and pleasant, but you must pass through rough and dangerous places before you reach the end of your journey."

Awesome. At least he was able to confirm that I was headed in the right direction. Also, I think he was a little bit afraid of me, because he had apparently made his cooks stay up late baking meat pies. They filled my basket and sent me on my way.

Several miles later, I was resigning myself to another exhausting day of majestic countryside and slipper blisters, when I finally saw it. In a cornfield not far off the road, stuck up on a pole, was a scarecrow.

This wasn't some pleasant-looking actor in a suit, though, with oddly charming burlap neck-fold makeup. This was, like, a *real* scarecrow, with a sack for a head that had been hastily painted with kind of a half-ass grimace to scare off birds. It was wearing worn-out blue Munchkin clothes complete with pointy hat, and stuffed with straw that left its entire body lumpy and misshapen.

I stared into its dead eyes. Was it possible that this was just a normal, un-enchanted scarecrow? "Uh, do you... speak?"

"Certainly," answered the Scarecrow, in a surprisingly husky voice. "How do you do?"

"I'm not feeling well," said the Scarecrow, his painted mouth curling into a wide smile. "For it is very tedious being perched up here night and day to scare away crows."

"Yeah," was all I managed to mutter over the sound of my own internal screaming. "Sucks."

"Alas," he said, "this pole is stuck up my back. If you will please take away the pole, I shall be greatly obliged to you."

Okay Grimsbro, I thought, *suck it up*. Creepy or not, the Scarecrow was Dorothy's dearest friend in Oz, and obviously a vital plot point in this whole story. I reached up with both arms and lifted him off the pole—he actually turned out to be quite light. He also *wiggled* while I set him down. *Yeeeeeeeewwww*.

"Thank you very much," the Scarecrow said. "I feel like a new man!"

As off-putting as it was to watch his painted-on scarecrow face speaking and contorting into various expressions, seeing him gyrate and move and bow and walk around on his own was somehow *even worse*.

"Who are you?" asked the Scarecrow, stretching, scratching himself and yawning. "And where are you going?"

"Go ahead and call me Dorothy, I guess? I'm going to the Emerald City to ask the wizard to send me back to... oh, let's just say Kansas." I was hoping he would at least be able to tell me how much farther Oz was, but the Scarecrow had never even heard of it. The city *or* the wizard.

"I don't know anything," he said sadly. "You see, I am stuffed, so I have no brains *at all*."

"Ugh. So you're basically useless to me."

His uncanny, painted eyes lit up. "Do you think," he asked, "if I go to the Emerald City with you, that Oz would give me some brains?"

"Definitely," I said. "Or... *maybe*? At the very least a half-assed diploma or something that sort of *represents* brains. Which is better than nothing."

"That is true," said the Scarecrow. "You see," he continued confidentially, "I don't mind my legs and arms and body being stuffed, because I cannot get hurt. If anyone treads on my toes or sticks a pin into me, it doesn't matter, for I can't feel it. But I do not want people to call me a fool, and if my head stays stuffed with straw instead of with brains, as yours is, how am I ever to know anything?"

I was fairly certain that getting him to join me was imperative to somehow finishing this hallucination or video game or whatever the hell it was. Also, something about the way this horrifying nightmare creature truly yearned for more was genuinely touching. "If you come with, me I'll ask Oz to do everything he can for you," I said.

"Thank you," he answered gratefully. I managed to dodge his hug, but had to help him over the fence on the way back to the road.

Toto, for the record, was even more freaked out by this new addition to our party than I was. He kept growling, and stopping to launch into full-on barking fits.

"Don't worry about the dog," I said. "He hasn't actually bitten anything yet."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," replied the Scarecrow. "He can't hurt the straw.

Do let me carry that basket for you. I shall not mind it, for I can't get tired."

Hmm. At least I wouldn't have to carry my own pies. "I'll tell you a secret," he continued as he walked along. "There is only one thing in the world I am afraid of."

I stopped in my tracks. "Oh. We're about due for a Wicked Witch sighting, aren't we?"

"No," said the Scarecrow. "The only thing I'm afraid of is *a lighted match*." He just stood there, staring at me.

Okay, that wasn't ominous at all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROAD THROUGH THE FOREST.

After a few hours, the road started getting rougher. Whatever municipality was in charge of yellow brick maintenance apparently gave fewer fucks the further you got from Munchkin Central. I had to keep an eye out for potholes, which of course the Scarecrow would invariably step right into, tripping and smacking hard against the bricks. It didn't seem to hurt him at all, but it meant I had to help him up while he laughed merrily at his own mishap.

And to be honest, earnest or not, I didn't really want to touch that guy any more than I absolutely had to.

Around noon, we parked it on the side of the road by a picturesque stream for some lunch. I didn't know how long my stash had to last me, so I endeavored to limit myself to half a dozen meat pies.

Partway through, I gestured at the Scarecrow with a half-eaten pie and kind of grunted.

He demurred. "I am never hungry. And it is a lucky thing I am not, for my mouth is only painted, and if I should cut a hole in it so I could eat, the straw I am stuffed with would come out, and that would spoil the shape of my head."

Once again: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.

"Tell me something about yourself and the country you came from," said the Scarecrow, when I had finished my sixth pie and was eyeing a seventh, despite my pledge. So I told him about the mall, and how boring everything was there, and how the saleslady at the shop had basically tricked me into coming to Oz.

The Scarecrow listened carefully. "I cannot understand why you should

wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dreary, fluorescent-lit place you call The Mall."

"Yeah, but you have stuffing for brains. And there's more than just the mall. You know, like cell phones and Netflix and Tumblr and junk."

I closed my eyes and clicked my heels together gently. *There's no place like cell phones and Netflix and Tumblr and junk.*

The Scarecrow sighed. "Of course I cannot understand it," he said. "If your peoples' heads were stuffed with straw, like mine, you would probably all live in the beautiful places, and The Mall would have no people at all."

"Fair enough," I said. "What about you? What's your whole deal?"

"My whole deal is very little indeed. I was only made the day before yesterday. What happened in the world before that time is all unknown to me."

Huh. For some reason I had assumed he had been stuck up on that pole a lot longer. "Luckily," he continued, "when the farmer made my head, one of the first things he did was to paint my ears, so that I heard what was going on."

"Wait, so was it, like, *magic* paint? Were they *trying* to make a living scarecrow?" I was just trying to figure out how he had come to life. "Did a talking snowman maybe give you that hat?"

"Not that I'm aware of." He continued his story—basically, the farmer had painted on his face bit by bit, chatting away with some other Munchkin, and the scarecrow had become more and more aware of his surroundings as he'd gone, but kept his mouth shut because he hadn't figured out how to talk yet. The farmer, for what it was worth, was crap at drawing faces. One eye was significantly larger than the other, and the ears weren't at all straight. After marvelling at their handiwork, the pair of them had hauled the Scarecrow off to the cornfield and stuck him up on the pole to frighten birds.

"I did not like to be deserted this way. So I tried to walk after them. But my feet would not touch the ground, and I was forced to stay on that pole. It was a lonely life to lead, for I had nothing to think of, having been made such a short while before."

It didn't seem like there had been anything special about his creation. Would *anything* with a face drawn on it come to life in Oz? I had a Sharpie in my bag, and thought about decorating a rock to see what would happen, but stopped myself. The thought of that rock, just sitting there, motionless,

thinking thoughts for eternity made me shudder. If the farmer knew what he was doing, the guy was a fucking monster.

The Scarecrow continued his story. A bunch of birds had flown up, but they'd thought he was a real Munchkin and left, which made him proud. "By and by an old crow flew near me, and after looking at me carefully he perched upon my shoulder and said: 'I wonder if that farmer thought to fool me in this clumsy manner. Any crow of sense could see that you are only stuffed with straw.' Then he hopped down at my feet and ate all the corn he wanted."

"So the *birds* here can talk, too? Can they talk to anyone? Or just scarecrows?"

The Scarecrow, of course, had no idea. The one bird told the other birds he was a fake, and soon there was a whole flock feasting on his corn. So now he felt like a failure.

"But the old crow comforted me, saying, 'If you only had brains in your head you would be as good a man as any of them, and a better man than some of them. Brains are the only things worth having in this world, no matter whether one is a crow or a man."

So basically, some bird told him that brains would fix his problems, and that was enough for the Scarecrow. "By good luck you came along and pulled me off the stake, and from what you say I am sure the Great Oz will give me brains as soon as we get to the Emerald City."

"I genuinely hope he does," I said. The movie ended with some kind of vague platitudes about him having had brains all along, and then the whole thing turned out to be a fever dream back in a sepia-tone dustbowl. But they changed the ending of children's movies all the time. Like, in the original story, the Little Mermaid *dies at the end*. The truth was, I had absolutely no idea how this was going to turn out for him.

"Well, we might as well get on with it. Here, take my pies."

We continued down the road in silence. There were no more fences on the roadside, and fewer houses and fruit trees. The farther we went, the more dismal and lonesome the country became.

Something about the utterly arbitrary nature of his *entire existence* was upsetting me. Some farmer wants the crows to leave his crops alone, so he stitches together a *living being* with thoughts and feelings and *desires*? What if I hadn't come along? He would have just been stuck there for... how long did an average scarecrow last out in a cornfield, anyway? Would

he have eventually just rotted away? All the time yearning for more?

I know it was all just a stupid story, but I decided that I was going to get the Scarecrow his stupid brains if there was any way I could.

Toward evening we came to a great forest, where the trees grew so big and close together that their branches met over the yellow bricks. The branches all but shut out what little daylight was left. I remembered being genuinely afraid of the dark, foresty parts of *The Wizard of Oz* when I was a kid. Also, I was pretty sure the Wicked Witch was in those woods somewhere.

"If this road goes in, it must come out," said the Scarecrow. "And as the Emerald City is at the other end of the road, we must go wherever it leads us."

"Yup," I said.

We ventured forth. After an hour or so the light faded away completely, and I was stumbling in the darkness. Toto seemed okay, though, and the Scarecrow insisted that he could see just fine, so he took me by the arm and led the way. The way his light, lumpy, wiggly arm pulled on mine made the whole experience that much more terrifying.

"Um, is there, like, anywhere we could stop and camp out for the night?"

"I see a little cottage at the right of us," he said, "built of logs and branches. Shall we go there?"

"Jesus Christ, yes."

So the Scarecrow led me through the trees until we reached the cottage, which was thankfully empty (or, the random sentient automatons that inhabited it were blissfully obscured by darkness, at the very least). I found a bunch of dried leaves piled up in one corner and settled into them to sleep, with Toto curled up alongside me to keep away the shivers.

The Scarecrow, who assured me he was "never tired", stood up in another corner and waited patiently until morning came.

CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE OF THE TIN WOODSMAN.

When I awoke, the sun was shining straight through a sizeable gap in the cottage wall, and despite what I can assure you was a valiant effort, my attempts to screw my eyelids shut and ignore the daybreak proved useless. Somewhere outside, Toto was barking at birds, or squirrels, or Tooth Fairies, or whatever the hell they had in this godforsaken land. I sat up and looked around. The Scarecrow was standing patiently in the corner, eyes open wide, staring at me.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaah.

My mouth felt like an ashtray and tasted like hate. "Ugh," I said. "Water. Does this place have running water?"

"Why do you want water?" the Scarecrow asked.

I'm generally grumpy on the very best of mornings, which this was very much *not*. "Um, to drink? To wash in?" I shot him a look that I'm not particularly proud of. "What the fuck do you *think* I want water for?"

For what it was worth, he seemed oblivious to my tone. "What is a *fugg*?"

As dedicated as I was to my crappy mood, his earnest, wide-eyed look of curiosity was too much. I cracked a smile. "It's not a fugg, it's a *fuck*. Like, you know, a bone? A shag? You can take a flying one at a rolling doughnut?"

He narrowed his eyes and nodded. "So a fugg is something that *flies*."

It was like he was constitutionally unable to say curse words. And, depending on what kind of simulation this whole thing was, that might be literally true. "It's a hard K at the end, not a G," I insisted. "Fuuuuuuuuuck."

```
"Guuuuuuuuck."
```

Jesus Christ. "Okay, starts with an F. FUH."

"I *know*, right?" The Scarecrow's mismatched eyes widened, and it dawned on me that, as far as I knew, we were the only two people in the vicinity. "Wait a minute, who said that?"

I poked my head out the door and heard another moan come from somewhere off in the woods. *Could it be...?* I pushed a few steps into the foliage, with the Scarecrow following close behind, and spotted something shining in a ray of that godawful morning sun. Sure as shit, next to a half-chopped tree trunk, with an uplifted axe in his hands, stood the Tin Woodsman. And here's something I was completely unprepared for:

The Tin Woodsman was fucking *hot*.

He wasn't all cylindrical and vaguely genderless like the guy in the movie. He was all sleek and shiny, like a *sexy motorcycle*. I don't know how they manufacture Tin Woodsmen at all, but his face looked like it was *chiseled* from something.

And, more importantly, he was *here*, which meant that I was that much closer to getting the hell out of this waking nightmare. Toto made a quick snap at the Woodsman's leg, hurting his teeth in the process.

"Praise Satan," I said. "I was worried we'd have to walk for two or three more days before we ran into you."

"If this Satan fellow sent you, then praise him indeed," the Tin Woodsman said. "I've been groaning for more than a year, and no one has ever heard me before or come to help me."

"Hold on. You can talk right now?"

"Of course."

"Then why were you *moaning*? For *a year*? Did it ever occur to you that random strangers might be more willing to investigate if you said actual

[&]quot;Fuh."

[&]quot;And ends with an UCK."

[&]quot;Uck."

[&]quot;Now say it all together."

[&]quot;Fluck."

[&]quot;Motherfucker!" That one was a real curse, not an instructional one.

[&]quot;Futher mucker."

words instead of making creepy sex noises?"

He stood silently for a moment. "I'm trying to shrug," he said at last, "but I'm rusted so badly that I cannot move at all. If I am well oiled I shall soon be all right again."

The Scarecrow ran back to the cottage to retrieve the oil can, and returned promptly. "So, uh, *which parts* get oiled, now?" I asked.

"Oil my neck, first," replied the Tin Woodsman. I did, but it was rusted pretty badly, so the Scarecrow took hold of the tin head with both his hands and moved it gently from side to side until it worked freely. The Woodsman let out a low, soft moan.

You're killing me, dude.

"Now oil the joints in my arms," he said. So we did, and the Tin Woodsman gave a sigh of what I can only call *satisfaction* and lowered his axe. "This is a great comfort," he said. "I have been holding that axe in the air ever since I rusted, and I'm glad to be able to put it down at last. Now, if you will oil the joints of my legs..."

Right. Of course. *The legs*. The Woodsman's whole, like, torso unit was much more contoured than the one in the movie, and while I wouldn't exactly say there was a bulge down there or anything, the way he was put together made it look like there might be some sort of... *compartment?* Like there could be *attachments* or something inside. I'm just saying.

I tried to get through the oiling as quickly as possible, but of course his legs were even more rusted than the rest of him, so the Scarecrow had to wiggle them all around like crazy. The process left me queasy and aroused in equal measure. And then ashamed, of course, followed by embarrassment, since, intellectually at least, I knew I had nothing to be ashamed of. Then, somehow, *aroused* again? Possibly by the *embarrassment*? The whole thing was a giant puberty shit sandwich, and I can't tell you how glad I was when it was finally over.

The Tin Woodsman thanked us again for his release. At the very least, he was polite.

"I might have stood there always if you had not come along," he said. "So you have certainly saved my life. How did you happen to be here?"

"Oh, we're off to see the..." I remembered my public domain restrictions. "...Oz guy. You know, the great and powerful wizard? The woods got super dark, and I think we spent the night in your cottage."

"Why do you wish to see Oz?" he asked.

"I want him to send me back to Kansas, or wherever, and the Scarecrow wants him to cram some brains into his head," I replied.

The Tin Woodsman appeared to think deeply for a moment. "Do you suppose Oz could give me a heart?"

"Absolutely!" I said. "Well, technically I have no idea. But it can't be any harder than giving the Scarecrow brains, right?"

"True," the Tin Woodsman returned. "So, if you will allow me to join your party, I will also go to the Emerald City and ask Oz to help me."

"Come along," said the Scarecrow heartily, and needless to say I was more than happy to have him join the party. His timing was excellent, too, because just a short way up the road the trees and branches grew so thick over the bricks that we couldn't pass. But the Tin Woodsman set to work with his axe and cleared a passage in no time.

This time, watching him chop away from a safe distance, the impure thoughts flowed freely without any of the extra baggage. *Yeah*, *that's the stuff*. In fact, after we continued our trek I was still so fixated on the way his hip joints rotated as he walked that I didn't even notice when the Scarecrow stumbled into a hole and rolled over to the side of the road. He had to call to me to help him up again.

"Why didn't you walk around the hole?" the Tin Woodsman asked.

"I don't know enough," replied the Scarecrow cheerfully. "My head is stuffed with straw, you know, and that is why I am going to Oz to ask him for some brains."

"Oh, I see," the Tin Woodsman said. "But, after all, brains are not the best things in the world."

"Have you any?" inquired the Scarecrow. Their whole conversation was weirdly polite, but nevertheless fascinating.

"No, my head is quite empty," the Tin Woodsman answered. "But once I had brains, and a heart also. Having tried them both, I should much rather have a heart."

"And why is that?" asked the Scarecrow.

"I will tell you my story, and then you will know."

"Hold on," I said. "If this is going to be a whole big thing, I'ma eat me some meat pies." I opened the basket and was a bit disappointed at how few were left. It was a good thing neither of my companions needed to eat, because there were barely enough left to last me the day. Toto wagged his tail frantically and barked, and I begrudgingly split the first pie with him.

"Okay," I said as we continued walking, my face half-stuffed. "Go." The Tin Woodsman launched into his tale.

"I was born the son of a woodman who chopped down trees in the forest and sold the wood for a living. When I grew up, I too became a woodchopper, and after my father died I took care of my old mother as long as she lived. Then I made up my mind that instead of living alone I would marry, so that I might not become lonely.

"There was one of the Munchkin girls who was so beautiful that I soon grew to love her with all my heart. She, on her part, promised to marry me as soon as I could earn enough money to build a better house for her. So I set to work harder than ever. But the girl lived with an old woman who did not want her to marry anyone, for she was so lazy she wished the girl to remain with her and do the cooking and the housework. So the old woman went to the Wicked Witch of the East, and promised her two sheep and a cow if she would prevent the marriage. Thereupon the Wicked Witch enchanted my axe, and when I was chopping away at my best one day, for I was anxious to get the new house and my wife as soon as possible, the axe slipped all at once and cut off my left leg."

"Jesus," I said. That shit just got real.

"This at first seemed a great misfortune, for I knew a one-legged man could not do very well as a wood-chopper. So I went to a tinsmith and had him make me a new leg out of tin. The leg worked very well, once I was used to it."

I have to admit, I was impressed by his can-do attitude. I almost asked how he even got to the tinsmith, but I remembered the sheer quantity of witch blood splattered all over the landscape a couple of days back when the house first dropped, and decided I was better off not knowing the gory details.

The Woodsman continued his story. "But my action angered the Wicked Witch of the East, for she had promised the old woman I should not marry the pretty Munchkin girl. When I began chopping again, my axe slipped and cut off my right leg."

Okay. I was starting to see how this was going to go down.

"Again I went to the tinsmith, and again he made me a leg out of tin. After this the enchanted axe cut off my arms, one after the other; but, nothing daunted, I had them replaced with tin ones. The Wicked Witch then made the axe slip and cut off my head, and at first I thought that was the

end of me. But the tinsmith happened to come along, and he made me a new head out of tin."

"Sure," I said. "Why not?" If some random straw-filled burlap sack could walk and talk and have aspirations, why not a metal head? I reminded myself to never construct anything that even remotely looked like it had a face while I was here.

"I thought I had beaten the Wicked Witch then, and I worked harder than ever, but I little knew how cruel my enemy could be. She thought of a new way to kill my love for the beautiful Munchkin maiden, and made my axe slip again, so that it cut right through my body, splitting me into two halves. Once more the tinsmith came to my help and made me a body of tin, fastening my tin arms and legs and head to it, by means of joints, so that I could move around as well as ever."

Okay, who the hell was this tinsmith guy? I was beginning to think maybe we should be following whatever color of road led to *him*.

"But, alas! I had now no heart, so that I lost all my love for the Munchkin girl, and did not care whether I married her or not. I suppose she is still living with the old woman, waiting for me to come after her.

"My body shone so brightly in the sun that I felt very proud of it and it did not matter now if my axe slipped, for it could not cut me. There was only one danger—that my joints would rust. But I kept an oil can in my cottage and took care to oil myself whenever I needed it. However, there came a day when I forgot to do this, and, being caught in a rainstorm, before I thought of the danger, my joints had rusted, and I was left to stand in the woods until you came to help me.

"It was a terrible thing to undergo, but during the year I stood there I had time to think that the greatest loss I had known was the loss of my heart. While I was in love I was the happiest man on earth; but no one can love who has not a heart, and so I am resolved to ask Oz to give me one. If he does, I will go back to the Munchkin maiden and marry her."

Oh my God. *He was so emo*.

"All the same," said the Scarecrow, "I shall ask for brains instead of a heart. For a fool would not know what to do with a heart if he had one."

"I shall take the heart," returned the Tin Woodsman. "For brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world."

Normally I would agree with the Scarecrow—I'll take thoughts over feelings any day of the week. But at this point I was in it *deep* for that sleek,

shiny, heartbroken son of a bitch. Even his *politeness* was somehow turning me on. I had to remind myself that both of them were probably some combination of computer program and drug trip, and regardless of whether they got their respective organs or not, the important thing was that I finish whatever the hell this was and get back home.

And soon. My stomach made a weird gurgling noise, and I quieted it with another one of the few remaining meat pies. They wouldn't actually let me *starve to death* in this thing, right?

Right?

CHAPTER VI.

THE COWARDLY LION.

We walked on through the woods. By now the yellow bricks underfoot were almost completely covered in dead branches and rotting leaves, so traveling had become kind of a pain in the ass. Still, if this story followed the movie at all, I was pretty sure there was a Cowardly Lion somewhere in these woods, and once we added him to the group it was straight to Emerald City, one more witch murder, some tearful goodbyes and *bam*, back to the mall to fill out a VERY STRONGLY WORDED market research form. I'd be out of there in...

No time? I realized that I'd already been in the Oz Matrix or whatever it was for at least two and a half days. Was this one of those things where I'd wake up to find that no time had passed in the real world? Or was I actually laying on a cot in the back of a shitty mall store with wires and feeding tubes hooked up to me, and all of this was happening in *real time*? If I just never came home from the mall, my Mom would *freak the fuck out*.

Suddenly I was even more eager to return home. A deep growl came from some wild animal hidden among the trees. And even though I was specifically looking for something that fit that description, the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"That was a lion, right?" I asked. "Do you guys think that sounded like a lion?"

The Scarecrow gasped. "I certainly hope there aren't any lions in these woods!"

I was definitely hoping there *were*. But come to think of it, in the real world, lions didn't even live in forests. "Um, how far are we from the Emerald City?" I asked the Woodsman. "Are there, like, any African savannas between here and there?"

"I cannot tell," he said, "for I have never been to the Emerald City. But

my father went there once, when I was a boy, and he said it was a long journey through a dangerous country."

Well, that was no help. "But I am not afraid so long as I have my oil can," he continued, "and nothing but fire can hurt the Scarecrow. And you bear upon your forehead the mark of the Good Witch's kiss, which will protect you from harm."

Oh yeah—I had pretty much blocked that whole thing with the kiss out of my memory. There was another mysterious growl, and Toto scampered close to my side. This wasn't the kind of book where some animal *ate my dog*, was it?

As if on cue, there was a terrible roar from the forest, and an enormous lion bounded into the road. This wasn't some 1930s character actor in a fur suit, either. It was *an actual lion*, and it was *huge*. With one blow of its paw it sent the Scarecrow tumbling off the road, and it did its damnedest to maul the Tin Woodsman with its claws. He didn't even dent, but he fell on his side and lay perfectly still.

Toto ran straight toward the lion, barking, and the big cat opened its mouth to snap him up in one bite. It didn't look cowardly *at all*. Still, half on instinct and half based on the fact that I thought I knew how this story was supposed to turn out, I rushed forward. "Please be the cowardly one, please be the cowardly one," I muttered to myself.

Then I punched that big, stupid lion right in the nose. "DO NOT EAT MY DOG."

The lion yelped and fell back on his haunches. "I didn't eat him!" he whined, rubbing his nose with a paw.

Oh, thank god. "You ARE the cowardly one! Ha!"

"I know it," the Lion said, hanging his head in shame. "I've always known it. But how can I help it?"

"I don't know," I said, irked. Coward or not, if the Scarecrow and Woodsman had been regular people they'd pretty much be dead right now. "Maybe don't attack people who are stuffed with straw?"

"Is he stuffed?" the Lion asked, surprised. "So *that*'s why he went over so easily. It astonished me to see him whirl around so. Is the other one stuffed also?"

"No," I said. "Tin."

"That's why he nearly blunted my claws," the Lion said. "When they

scratched against the tin it made a cold shiver run down my back. What is that little animal you are so tender of? Is he made of tin, or stuffed?"

"Neither. He's a, uh... a *meat dog*, I guess."

"Oh! He's a curious animal and seems remarkably small, now that I look at him. No one would think of biting such a tiny thing, except a coward like me." He was starting back up with the self-pity schtick again.

"You get that it's not okay to maul people because you're scared of them, right? Like, straight-up *killing someone* is not an appropriate reaction to *the wiggins*?"

The Lion sighed. "All the other animals in the forest naturally expect me to be brave, for the Lion is everywhere thought to be the King of Beasts," he said. "I learned that if I roared very loudly every living thing was frightened and got out of my way. Whenever I've met a man I've been awfully scared; but I just roared at him, and he has always run away as fast as he could go."

"But that isn't right. The King of Beasts shouldn't be a coward," the Scarecrow said. He had managed to get back on his feet, and was attempting to pat himself back into shape.

"I know it," said the Lion, wiping a tear from his eye with the tip of his tail. "It is my great sorrow, and makes my life very unhappy. But whenever there is danger, my heart begins to beat fast."

"Perhaps you have heart disease," said the Tin Woodsman.

"It may be," said the Lion.

"If you have, you ought to be glad, for it proves you have a heart. For my part, I have no heart; so I cannot have heart disease."

"You know," I said, "that actually doesn't even sound like cowardice. It sounds like *social anxiety*. My friend Madeline has that. Pretty much *everyone* has that. What you should do is go to the Wizard and ask him to give you some Klonopin."

"And that would cure me?" the Lion asked. "Do you think Oz could give me this Klonopin?"

"Just as easily as he could give me brains," the Scarecrow said.

"Or give me a heart," added the Tin Woodsman.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll go with you," said the Lion. "For my life is simply unbearable without a bit of courage."

At last, our little group was complete. Or I hoped it was, at least. For all I knew the movie had trimmed its cast for budget reasons, and the book

version of Dorothy also teamed up with a talking broom handle and a motherfucking *pirate ghost*.

The dark forest, for its part, just kept going and going for hours. At least having a full-sized lion at our side seemed to be keeping miscellaneous hidden growly things away. The rest of the day was utterly uneventful. In fact, the most interesting thing that happened was when the Tin Woodsman stepped on a bug, and was so upset about it that he cried his jaw shut. Then he couldn't talk, so had to do a kind of frantic, grunting pantomime until the Scarecrow finally figured out what his deal was and got some oil up in there.

"This will serve me a lesson, to look where I step," the Woodsman said. "For if I should kill another bug or beetle I should surely cry again, and crying rusts my jaws so that I cannot speak." He spent the rest of the afternoon carefully walking with his eyes fixed on the road, meticulously stepping over every ant.

"You people with hearts have something to guide you," he said, "and need never do wrong. But I have no heart, and so I must be very careful. When Oz gives me a heart, I needn't mind so much."

Of course, I had technically killed one witch already, and if the Cowardly Lion reacted to most strangers the way he had when he'd met us, he probably had a whole cave full of Munchkin bones hidden somewhere in the forest. If it was kindness the Tin Woodsman was after, an actual, physical heart didn't seem to have all that much to do with it.

I couldn't bear to bring it up, though, because I was sure it would break whatever mechanism that big, dumb robotic sweetheart was using as a substitute.

CHAPTER VII.

THE JOURNEY TO THE GREAT OZ.

We still hadn't made it out of the forest when night fell, and with no convenient abandoned cottages nearby, we were forced to camp out under a big tree. The Woodsman quickly chopped up a big pile of firewood, and was amazed when I showed him how a Bic lighter worked. (I don't smoke, but carry a lighter regardless, because Peacoat Pete Zamora smokes, and somehow never seems to have any way to light a cigarette on his own.)

The resulting campfire was toasty and warm, and I sat down on a log beside it and shared the last of the meat pies with Toto. I was pretty concerned with what we would do the following morning for breakfast.

"If you wish," said the Lion, "I will go into the forest and kill a deer for you. You can roast it by the fire, since your tastes are so peculiar that you prefer cooked food, and then you will have a very good breakfast."

"Don't!" the Tin Woodsman begged. "Please don't. I should certainly weep if you killed a poor deer, and then my jaws would rust again."

So the Lion went into the forest and found his own supper—we never asked him what it was, and he never volunteered it. Meanwhile, I was trying to figure out how I could revisit the subject with him discreetly and —more importantly—cook an entire deer over a campfire by morning without the Tin Woodsman finding out.

Meanwhile, the Scarecrow had found a tree full of nuts and was filling my basket with them. Granted, his stuffed hands were so clumsy and the nuts were so small that he dropped almost as many as he managed to get in the basket. But the Scarecrow didn't mind how long his task took, since it kept him well away from the fire.

I nibbled on a nut that had rolled nearby, and found that it was actually

quite tasty. They would certainly make an easier and less gruesome breakfast than fresh venison, and the whole basketful could potentially last me for days.

A short time later, when I was trying to build some kind of makeshift bed in a patch of dirt, the Scarecrow risked coming close to the fire to bring me a few big armfuls of dried leaves, covering me with them to keep me warm and snug. All of this lent credence to my theory that human hearts were vastly overrated.

It was surprisingly comfortable, and I slept like a rock until morning.

When daybreak came I found a brook to wash my face in, feasted on my bounty of tree nuts, and gathered the troops for the day's march. Alas, boredom was *not* destined to be our biggest problem on that particular day. About an hour up the road we came to a long, wide ditch that divided the forest as far as we could see on either side. It was crazy deep, and littered with jagged rocks at the bottom. The sides were much too steep to climb down.

Damn it. This part was not in the movie *at all*. "Okay, what now?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," the Tin Woodsman said. The Lion just shook his shaggy mane.

"We cannot fly, that is certain," the Scarecrow said. "Neither can we climb down into this great ditch. Therefore, if we cannot jump over it, we must stop where we are."

Astute.

"I think I could jump over it," the Cowardly Lion said, gazing thoughtfully from one side to the other and measuring the distance carefully in his mind.

"Then we are all right," answered the Scarecrow, "for you can carry us all over on your back, one at a time."

The Lion just gulped.

"I'll go first," declared the Scarecrow. "If you found that you could not jump over the gulf, Dorothy would be killed." I had forgotten that he still thought my name was Dorothy. "Or the Tin Woodman badly dented on the rocks below," he continued. "But if I am on your back it will not matter so much, for the fall would not hurt me."

"I am terribly afraid of falling, myself," the Cowardly Lion said. "But I suppose there's nothing to do but try. Get on my back and we will make the attempt." The Scarecrow climbed up on the Lion's back, and the big

palooka walked to the edge of the gulf and crouched down.

"Why don't you run and jump?" the Scarecrow asked.

"Because that isn't the way we Lions do these things." Then, with a big spring, he bounded into the air and landed safely on the other side. It didn't even look particularly hard. I took my turn next, gripping Toto in one arm, holding tightly to his mane with the other hand. For a quick second it felt like we were flying, and before I had time to even be freaked out, we were safe on the other side. The Lion went back a third time and got the Tin Woodsman, and then we all sat down for a minute to give him a chance to rest. He panted like a giant, goofy Labrador retriever.

The forest was, if anything, even thicker, darker, and gloomier on the other side. I was honestly beginning to worry that we'd never get out of the damn thing. To make it worse, we soon heard strange noises from the depths of the woods that made yesterday's growls seem cute in comparison.

The Lion dropped his voice to a whisper. "This is the part of the country where the Kalidahs live."

"What the fuck are *Kalidahs*?"

"Monstrous beasts with bodies like bears and heads like tigers," replied the Lion. "And with claws so long and sharp they could tear me in two as easily as I could kill Toto." He gave me a glance that looked extra fearful, even for him. "I'm terribly afraid of the Kalidahs."

"Jesus," I said. "I feel like I am, too."

The Lion was about to reply when suddenly we came to another gulf across the road. This one was way too broad and deep for him to leap across.

"Thoughts?" I asked.

The Scarecrow looked around and tapped his burlap chin with an ill-fitting glove. "There is a great tree, standing close to the ditch," he said. "If the Tin Man can chop it down, so that it will fall to the other side, we can walk across it easily."

"That is a first-rate idea," the Lion said. "One would almost suspect you had brains in your head, instead of straw."

I was definitely beginning to suspect that the moral of this whole thing was going to be that your brains or heart or Klonopin or whatever was inside you all along, because it did seem like a pretty smart plan. The Woodsman set to work at once—as quietly as possible, because *holy fuck*, *Kalidahs*—and chopped most of the way through the massive trunk in just

minutes. Then the Lion put his front legs against the tree and pushed with all his might. Slowly the big tree tipped and fell with a crash across the ditch, with its top branches on the other side.

So much for quiet. We had just started to cross the makeshift bridge when a sharp growl made us all look up. To our shared horror, we saw running toward us two beasts with bodies like enormous grizzly bears and heads like jungle cats.

"Kalidahs!" said the Cowardly Lion, beginning to tremble.

"RUUUUUUUUUN!"

The Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman, and I scrambled across the tree trunk as quickly as we could manage. The Lion, however, as terrified as he was, turned to face the Kalidahs, and gave a roar so loud that I almost screamed, and the Scarecrow fell over backward at the far side of the chasm.

Even the fierce beasts stopped short and looked at him in surprise. But they seemed to realize that they were significantly larger than him, and outnumbered him two to one. The Kalidahs again rushed forward, and the Lion hurried across the tree, his face twisted into a visage of pure terror. Without even slowing down, the big-ass bearcats leapt onto the bridge to follow.

"We are lost," the Lion whimpered, "for they will surely tear us to pieces with their sharp claws." His voice dropped to a whisper. "But stand close behind me, and I will fight them as long as I am alive."

"Wait a minute!" I said. None of this was in the movie I was familiar with, but *The Wizard of Oz* was hardly the only thing I had ever seen on TV. "Chop it down! Woodsman, chop the tree down before they can get across!"

Fortunately the trunk was thinner near the top than it had been at the tree's base, and the Woodsman managed to get through it just as the two Kalidahs were nearly across. The tree fell with a crash into the gulf, carrying the snarling beasts with it. Both were dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks at the bottom.

"Well," said the Cowardly Lion as we took a moment to calm our nerves and catch our breath. "I see we are going to live a little while longer, and I am glad of it. Those creatures frightened me so badly that my heart is beating yet."

"Ah," said the Tin Woodsman sadly, "I wish I had a heart to beat."

So emo, even with death staring him in the face. My own heart skipped a beat.

"Also," he said, my name is 'Tin Woodman.'"

"Huh? What did *I* say?"

"When you asked me to chop down the bridge you called me *Woodsman*. With an 's.'"

Tin *Woodman*. "Okay, that sounds like a porn star name. I'm not calling you that."

He didn't protest, which was good because I was far too exhausted to hear it. Now that I realized that riding on the Lion was an option, though, I did that for the rest of the afternoon. To our mutual delight, the trees finally began to thin as we progressed. By late afternoon we came upon a broad, swiftly flowing river, with the Yellow Brick Road continuing through green meadows, bright flowers, and luscious-looking fruit trees on the other side.

"That river looks kind of rough," I said. "Can we all swim?"

"Not I," replied the Scarecrow. "The Tin Woodman must build us a raft, so we can float to the other side."

Indefatigable as ever, the Woodsman (with an 's' in the middle, goddamnit) took his axe and began to chop down small trees. While he was busy, the Scarecrow found a tree full of fruit on our side of the riverbank, which was nice, since I hadn't eaten anything but nuts all day. I had *long* since stopped worrying that the local foliage was all part of some elaborate trap.

It turned out the chopping part went much quicker than the actual raftbuilding part, and night came before he could finish. We found a cozy spot under the trees and I curled up against the Lion's soft, warm, somewhat rank-smelling hide to sleep. The good old, reliable (still horrifyingly creepy-faced, but that was hardly his fault) Scarecrow kept watch over us, just in case any more Kalidahs came wandering all the way out to the forest's edge.

I dreamed about Madeline, Peter Zamora, Astronaut Ice Cream for some reason, and my Mom.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEADLY POPPY FIELD.

I awoke the next morning refreshed and, to be honest, reasonably full of hope that I was getting toward the end of this godforsaken literature voyage, or at least to the part where we got to the city and were pampered by leggy brunettes and blandly handsome guys in muscle t-shirts. The Woodsman insisted that the countryside around the Emerald City was beautiful, and as far as I could tell, the landscape across the river certainly fit the bill. It looked idyllic as *balls*.

He was just finishing up with the raft (he didn't need sleep any more than the Scarecrow did, and had been working on it all night, bless the little empty compartment where he was supposed to have a heart). We all climbed onto it, and the whole thing damn near tipped over when the Lion stepped on board. But the rest of us stood up on the other side and just barely managed to balance the craft out. The Woodsman and Scarecrow had long poles, and started pushing the raft into the water.

It worked pretty well at first. But once we reached the middle of the river, the water grew so deep that the poles couldn't reach the bottom. The current here was swifter, and carried us downstream, farther and farther from the Yellow Brick Road.

"This is bad," the Woodsman said. "If we cannot get to the land we shall be carried into the country of the Wicked Witch of the West, and she will enchant us and make us her slaves."

- "And then I should get no brains," said the Scarecrow.
- "And I should get no courage," said the Cowardly Lion.
- "And I should get no heart," said the Tin Woodsman.
- "Yeah," I said, "and also THE PART ABOUT THE WITCH MAKING US HER SLAVES."
 - "We must certainly get to the Emerald City if we can," the Scarecrow

continued. He pushed so hard on his long pole that it stuck in the mud at the bottom of the river. Then, before he could pull it out again—or let go—the raft was swept away, and the Scarecrow was left clinging to the pole in the middle of the river.

"Goodbye!" he called after us.

"Scarecrow!" I yelled.

"Oh, poor, noble Scarecrow," the Tin Woodsman sniffled as we floated further down the river and our companion fell out of sight. "The irony! Rescued from one pole, only to be left on another, to live out the rest of his days *abandoned forever*."

"We're not abandoning him forever," I said. "Also, dry your tears on my hoodie or something. He still has your oilcan."

"Something must be done to save us," the Lion said. "I think I can swim to the shore and pull the raft after me, if you will only hold fast to the tip of my tail."

He sprang into the water, and the Woodsman grabbed his tail. Then the Lion began to swim toward the shore with all his might. It looked like pretty hard work, but the raft was slowly drawn out of the current, at which point I took the Woodsman's pole and helped push the rest of the way to land.

We were all pretty wiped out (or, those of us with muscles and ligaments were, at least), and the stream had carried us God knows how far past the road that led to the Emerald City.

"What shall we do now?" the Tin Woodsman asked.

"We'll walk along the riverbank back toward the road," I said, "and hope we can spot the Scarecrow from the shore as we go." We moved as fast as we could, and even though I was pretty worried about the Scarecrow, I had to admit that the countryside was straight-up lovely. I mean, I didn't usually go in for all that lush, flowery bullshit, but these ones were so big and colorful it was almost hypnotic.

After what felt like hours, the Woodsman cried out. "Look!"

There, in the middle of the water, was the Scarecrow, perched motionless upon his pole, looking all lonely and sad.

"Abandoned forever!" the Woodsman cried. "Without brains, without hope, without even the crows to keep him—"

"Okay, ENOUGH with the abandoned forever crap! Lion, can you swim out and fetch him?"

"I'm afraid it would be no use," the Lion said. "Even if I had strength left to brave the river once more, my entire body save for my nose sinks below the surface when I swim. If the Scarecrow were submerged so, I fear the swift current would wash all the stuffing right out of him."

"Okay, he *might* be abandoned forever." I sat on the river's bank and tried to come up with some kind of plan while the Woodsman and Lion gazed wistfully at the Scarecrow. Eventually, some random stork flew by and stopped to rest at the water's edge.

"Who are you and where are you going?" the Stork asked.

Talking stork? Sure, why not? "Arabella," I said, too tired to waste any energy arguing with a bird. "Er, I mean Dorothy. These are my friends, the Tin Woodsman and Cowardly Lion. We're trying to get to the Emerald City."

The Stork twisted her long neck and looked sharply at the group of us. "This isn't the road," she said.

"I know it isn't the road!" Ugh. "We lost our other friend out in the middle of the river, and are trying to figure out how to get him back on dry land."

"Hmm," she said, craning her neck to look across the water to where the Scarecrow was perched. "If he wasn't so big and heavy I would get him for you."

"He's not heavy at all! He's entirely stuffed with straw. Barely weighs a thing!"

"Well, I'll try," the Stork said, launching into the air. "But if I find he is too heavy to carry I shall have to drop him back in the river!"

"Wait! Don't..." It was too late. She was off.

The big bird flew over the water until she came to the Scarecrow, then grabbed him by the arm with her claws and carried him back to the bank. When the Scarecrow found himself among his friends again, he was so deliriously happy that he hugged every single one of us, up to and including Toto.

"Tol-de-ri-de-oh!" he sang. "I was afraid I should have to stay in the river forever! But the kind Stork saved me, and if I ever get any brains I shall find the Stork again and do her some kindness in return."

"That's all right," said the Stork. "I always like to help anyone in trouble."

She seemed kind of great, actually. "So, how does this work?" I asked.

"Do you join up with us now? Do you have any missing organs or personality traits you'd like to ask a wizard for?"

"I'm afraid I must go," the Stork said, "for my babies are waiting in the nest for me."

"Wait. Do you mean stork babies or *human* babies?" Storks were, like, the fairy tale euphemism for *childbirth*, right? "You know what, never mind. I don't think I even want to know."

"I hope you will find the Emerald City and that Oz will help you," the Stork said. Then she flew into the air and was soon out of sight.

We continued walking upriver toward the road. The sun was shining, birds were chirping, and huge flowers in red, yellow, white, blue, and purple became so thick that the ground was more or less carpeted with them. The aroma was almost... *spicy*.

"That smells kind of good," I said. "Right?"

"I suppose," answered the Scarecrow. "When I have brains, I shall probably like them better."

"If I only had a heart, I should love them," added the Tin Woodsman.

His whole heartsick routine should have been wearing thin by that point, but to be honest I just found it endearing. I was exhausted and more than a little lightheaded from the overpowering flower smell, and just then all was right with the world.

"I always did like flowers," the Lion said. "They seem so helpless and frail. But there are none in the forest so bright as these."

There were more and more red flowers as we walked on, and fewer and fewer of the other colors. Before long the red ones had entirely choked the other flowers out. "Hold on a minute," I said. My eyelids were getting so heavy I could barely keep them open. "What kind of flowers are these?"

Poppies, poppies, poppies.

"It's opium! The spicy red flower stink is *opium*! Run, you guys! We have to run!"

I stumbled trying to move forward, so the Tin Woodsman and Scarecrow each grabbed me by an arm and pulled me along. I kept catching myself drifting off, and tried to jerk my head to force myself awake. It was okay, though, because I suddenly realized I didn't *need* to walk. I could just float along casually, and didn't even need to be afraid of the flowers, because every single one of them was wearing a miniature black peacoat and asking me if I had a light.

"Dorothy, wake up!" the Scarecrow shouted, severely harshing my buzz.

"It's fine, I'm not asleepy. Sleepytime... *good*. 'Sall *bermanerma*."

"What shall we do?" asked the Tin Woodsman. I was still vaguely aware of my surroundings, but very clearly losing my battle with slumber.

"If we leave her here she will die," said the Lion. "The smell of the flowers is killing us all. I myself can scarcely keep my eyes open, and the dog is asleep already."

I wrenched one eye open and saw that Toto was indeed curled up in the flowers. I have to tell you that at that moment I straight-up envied the little son of a bitch.

"Run fast," the Scarecrow said to the Lion, "and get out of this deadly flower bed as soon as you can. We will bring the girl with us, but if you should fall asleep you are too big to be carried."

The Lion bounded forward as fast as he could go, and disappeared. The Scarecrow and Woodsman crammed Toto into my lap and kind of made a chair out of their arms, carrying me through the flowers as quickly as they could. We followed the bend of the river for a few minutes, and just as I was sure I couldn't stay awake a minute longer, we found the Lion lying fast asleep among the poppies.

The Scarecrow gasped.

"We can do nothing for him," said the Tin Woodsman, sadly. "For he is much too heavy to lift. We must leave him here to sleep, *abandoned forever*, and perhaps he will dream that he has found courage at last."

"I'm sorry," said the Scarecrow. "The Lion was a very good comrade for one so cowardly."

"No, wait, it's *fine*," I said through a yawn. The sleeping Lion looked to me like an incredibly comfortable bed just then. "The Good Witch saves us. Pretty witch... superimposed over the whole screen. Snow or... something. *All... goooood...*"

Consciousness deserted me at last.

CHAPTER IX.

THE QUEEN OF THE FIELD MICE.

I'm not sure how long I was unconscious, but when I woke up I was laying on a grassy hill. I opened my eyes, and the sea of red flowers seemed to have been replaced with stubby brown ones.

Wait. *Those weren't flowers*. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes, only to discover that I was *entirely surrounded by mice*. Small mice, big mice, mice in every shade of brown, as well as black and gray and white. Literally *thousands* of them, and each and every one was staring up at me patiently with a little piece of string in its mouth.

What the *fuck* did I miss while I was asleep?

From somewhere behind me, the Scarecrow spoke. "Permit me to introduce to you Her Majesty, the Queen."

Was I supposed to be able to tell which one of these rodents was *royalty*? "Uh, it's lovely to meet you... Your Majesty?" I muttered, just kind of to the assembled mouse crowd in general. One of them made a little curtsey. Upon further inspection, I decided that she did look reasonably dignified.

"So, does somebody want to explain to me what's going on here?" I stood up carefully to avoid crushing the sea of rodents, and turned around to find the Scarecrow and Tin Woodsman standing next to the decapitated carcass of a big, yellow cat.

"Jesus!" That last part came as a bit of a surprise. "What the *actual fuck*?"

"I rescued Her Majesty from this ferocious wildcat," the Woodsman said. Now I saw that his axe was thoroughly coated with cat blood. "I have no heart, you know, so I am careful to help all those who may need a friend,

even if it happens to be only a mouse."

"What about *the cat*? The cat didn't need a *friend*?" The whole thing seemed awfully arbitrary. I mean, the Cowardly Lion was off in the woods eating things that were probably at least as sympathetic as these mice were, and certainly much larger. I had been trying to convince myself that maybe deer and some of the other animals in Oz weren't sentient, and that the Lion was conscientious about which ones he made into dinner. But now I wasn't so sure.

"The beast had two rows of ugly teeth, and its red eyes glowed like balls of fire," the Scarecrow said. "Surely, it was a villain."

Okay. I was just going to have to roll with this one. "So now the Mouse Queen is our friend, and we're having a big mouse party. And the little pieces of string? What's the deal with those?"

"The Queen and her subjects have agreed to help us rescue the Cowardly Lion from the poppy field," the Woodsman said. "He is too heavy for the Scarecrow and I to move alone, so at first I thought we'd have to abandon him forever..."

"Of course you did."

"...but then the Scarecrow thought to build a truck from the trees by the riverside, and pull the Lion to safety by the combined strength of a thousand tiny mice."

He gestured to the river, and next to it there was indeed a sturdy-looking cart, with wheels made from cross sections of a thick tree trunk. I remembered that it took the Woodsman all night to build a raft. *How long had I been asleep?*

"So, wait," I said. "You had to *decapitate* a forty-pound housecat to rescue these guys. But they're cool with carting around a full-sized *lion*?"

"I was concerned about this myself," the Mouse Queen said. Oh, good. It talked. "But the funny tin man assured me that he was a coward, and that he would never hurt anyone who is your friend."

He literally tried to maul us to death yesterday. I held my tongue. It seemed obvious to me that if the opium poppies knocked me out cold, they would certainly affect tiny rodents much more severely, and we'd quickly wind up with a sleeping lion AND like five thousand sleeping field mice. But my head was groggy, my back was sore, and I had an awful crick in my neck from sleeping on a goddamned hill.

"You know what? I'm just going to let this thing play out however it's

going to play out."

The Scarecrow and Woodsman started fastening mice to the cart, using all the various strands of string that each mouse had between its teeth (I thought about asking where they'd gotten the string, but ultimately, who cared?). To my great surprise, it worked quite well. With the entire lot of them they were able to pull the cart easily, even with the Scarecrow and Woodsman riding on top of it (which, to be honest, I thought was kind of a dick move).

Fortunately, the Lion had almost made it to the edge of the poppies before passing out—I could see him from my spot on the hill. The mouse cart reached him quickly, and with a lot of grunting and groaning, the Woodsman and Scarecrow somehow managed to lift his huge, limp body up on top of it. At first, he proved too heavy for the mice to pull. But the Scarecrow and Woodsman helped push from behind, and they successfully hauled him out of the flowerbed and into fresh air before any of the mice succumbed to the opium haze.

It took an absurd amount of time to unfasten each little mouse from its tiny string harness, and to be honest the things kind of gave me the creeps, so I sat down with my back against the sleeping Lion and ate nuts while the others toiled away. It's not like we were going anywhere until the big guy woke up, anyway.

Each mouse scampered away once it was free, and the Mouse Queen was the last one to leave.

"If ever you need us again," she said, "come out into the field and call, and we shall hear you and come to your assistance. Goodbye!"

The Queen ran off, and I had to hold Toto tightly, because he started to chase her, and if I had learned one thing today it was that the Tin Woodsman would *chop your fucking head off* if you tried that shit. I hadn't quite decided if this bloodthirsty streak had made him less attractive to me, or more.

The Scarecrow went on a fruit run, and the rest of us chilled out by the Lion, waiting for his poppy trance to wear off.

CHAPTER X.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE GATE.

The Cowardly Lion took *forever* to wake up. When he finally did, though, he was overjoyed to discover that he had survived the flowers. After hearing about the mice and cart, his mood turned philosophical.

"I have always thought myself very big and terrible," he said. "Yet such little things as flowers came near to killing me, and such small animals as mice have saved my life. How strange it all is! But, comrades, what shall we do now?"

Something about his phrasing bugged me. *Comrades*? Was it possible that the entire point of this Oz business was to *indoctrinate* me in something?

We set out again upriver toward the road, and found it quite soon. On this side of the river, the yellow bricks were so well maintained they damn near shone, and it made for easy traveling. By then, though, my mind was going a mile a minute.

If this was all some kind of brainwashing trip, what were they even trying to reprogram my brain into? The first thing I'd done here was *crush an old lady to death beneath my house*, and everybody had seemed super excited about it. Then I met some folks, and we had to straight-up kill these big bear/tiger creatures, *purely in self-defense*, of course. Then the one guy who was LITERALLY crafted to appeal to my very specific (and, yeah, maybe kind of weird) taste in men, who cried his jaw shut when he ACCIDENTALLY STEPPED ON A BUG, just casually chops the head off a cat. *For the greater good*.

Holy shit, was I being *desensitized to violence*? Was I going to wind up a *mind-controlled KGB assassin* at the end of this? (Was the KGB even still a *thing*? Regardless, you *know* Vladimir Putin has people in charge of assassination and mind control, and I imagine there's a fair amount of

overlap between the two departments.)

I had already decided that if Oz was just a crazy-advanced computer simulation, or some kind of drug-assisted guided meditation, or just my own screwed-up brain dealing with a serious head wound, the only thing to be done was to follow the rules, treat the whole thing as if I had actually been whisked away to an honest-to-God magical kingdom, and just hope for the best. But this new angle raised the specter of an altogether more sinister possibility.

The truth was, the closer we got to the Emerald City, the more reservations I was starting to have about murdering a second witch, and with *malice aforethought* this time. I mean, if it came down to my life or dumping a bucket of water on some asshole, sure. But I had the uneasy feeling that it wouldn't wind up going down *quite* like it did in the film.

As we walked on, farmhouses started popping up alongside the road, a lot like the ones back in Munchkinland, but bigger, and green instead of blue. A woman came to her porch to watch us pass, all dressed in green, of course. She took one look at the Lion and ran back inside.

"These people do not seem to be as friendly as the Munchkins," the Scarecrow said. "I'm afraid we shall be unable to find a place to pass the night."

Ugh. "Well, I'm getting pretty tired of nuts and fruit," I said. Also, poor Toto refused to even touch the stuff, so as far as I knew he hadn't eaten anything since the meat pies, unless he had managed to nab himself a talking field mouse or something.

"Fuck it." If this was the kind of place where you could just walk up to someone's front door and ask them for dinner and a warm bed, it was at least worth a shot. I stopped at the next farmhouse and knocked.

A woman opened it just far enough to look out. "What do you want, child, and why is that great Lion with you?"

"The Lion's our friend, and trust me, he's more afraid of you than you are of him."

The Lion, for his part, looked mortified.

"So if that's the only thing keeping you from inviting us in, stop being Lion racist and get on with it."

"Well," the woman said after thinking it over, "if that is the case you may come in, and I will give you some supper and a place to sleep."

To be honest, I couldn't believe that it actually worked. But she brought

us in and introduced us to her husband and two kids, and started setting the table while they just stared at us. We made some small talk, and I mentioned that we were headed toward the Emerald City to see the Wizard.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed the man. His leg was in a cast, and he was lying on a couch in the corner. "Are you sure that Oz will see you?"

"Pretty sure."

"Well, it is said that he never lets anyone come into his presence. I have been to the Emerald City many times, and it is a beautiful and wonderful place, but I have never been permitted to see the Great Oz, nor do I know of any living person who has seen him."

This was the part where the townsfolk go on and on about how intimidating the wizard was, to make sure we'd be suitably dumbfounded when he turned out to be some dude behind a curtain or whatever.

"He sits day after day in the great throne room of his palace," the man said, starting to get himself all worked up. "And even those who wait upon him do not see him face to face! You see, Oz is a Great Wizard, and can take on any form he wishes. So that some say he looks like a bird, and some say he looks like an elephant, and some say he looks like a cat. To others he appears as a beautiful fairy, or a brownie, or in any other form that pleases him. But who the real Oz is, when he is in his own form, no living person can tell."

"Weird," I said. "Still, I'll take my chances."

"Why do you wish to see the terrible Oz?" he asked.

"I want him to give me some brains," the Scarecrow said eagerly.

"Oh, Oz could do that easily enough," declared the man. "He has more brains than he needs."

"And I want him to give me a heart," said the Woodsman.

"That will not trouble him," continued the man, "for Oz has a large collection of hearts, of all sizes and shapes."

Ew. "And I want him to give me courage," said the Cowardly Lion. "Or Klonopin."

"I know not of this Klonopin of which you speak," the man said. "But Oz keeps a great pot of courage in his throne room, which he has covered with a golden plate, to keep it from running over. He will be glad to give you some."

All of this sounded like utter bullshit to me.

"But what do YOU want?" the man continued.

"Uh, to get back to Kansas, I think," I said. It had been a long day, and I had forgotten if I was supposed to play along with the whole Dorothy scenario, or if I could just tell people I wanted to go to the mall in Calabasas.

"Not you," the man said. "HIM!" He pointed at Toto.

Toto just wagged his tail.

We were finally called to dinner, THANK GOD. It wound up being scrambled eggs and a genuinely delicious porridge thing, with a plate of white bread. I devoured about three helpings, and Toto ate a fair amount as well. The Lion had some porridge, although he pissed and moaned about it because he said oats were food for horses and not lions. The Woodsman and Scarecrow didn't need to eat at all, but they were perfectly happy to keep chatting with Leg Cast Guy about all his absurd wizard conspiracy theories.

Afterwards the woman showed me to a spare room, and a bed that, after however many days on the road, felt like the *softest and most heavenly bed I had ever slept on in my entire life*. Toto curled up beside me, the Scarecrow and Woodsman went and stood quietly in their respective corners, and the Lion stood guard by the door. In close quarters, you could really smell him, too.

I had what was by far the most comfortable night of sleep that I'd had since I'd gotten there. I mean, it could be that I still had a touch of the opium in my system, but still. In the morning we thanked our hosts graciously and were on our way. I felt slightly guilty about taking advantage of their politeness and pretty much forcing our way in there, but it had been a rough day, and my mind had wandered into some pretty dark places.

I was feeling better. I mean, still on guard against KGB brainwashing and whatever, but I was well rested, well fed, and ready to get on to the Wizard, on to the Witch, and finally get the goddamn hell out of Oz.

We started on our way as soon as the sun was up, and spotted a green glow on the horizon.

"Emerald City, here we come."

It got brighter and brighter as we approached, but apparently the city was MUCH farther away than it looked, because it was late afternoon before we finally reached the massive wall that surrounded it. It was crazy high, looked super thick, and was green as all fuck, just as promised.

I pushed the button next to the enormous, emerald-studded, sparkly green gate. I half-expected the guy from the movie to poke his head out of a

trapdoor and give us a bunch of shit about not being allowed in, but instead the massive doors just opened.

We walked inside, and found ourselves in a big, high-arched room with even more emeralds stuck all over the walls. The interior decorators in this part of Oz were *not* subtle. A little Munchkin-sized guy standing next to a big green box addressed us formally.

"What do you wish in the Emerald City?"

I told him we were there to see the Wizard, and he was so surprised at my answer that he sat down to think it over.

"It has been many years since anyone asked me to see Oz," he said, shaking his head. "He is powerful and terrible, and if you come on an idle or foolish errand to bother the wise reflections of the Great Wizard, he might be angry and destroy you all in an instant."

Sure, he might. Granted, the movie I knew had already proven to be different from the original *Wizard of Oz* book in a lot of important ways, but I was fairly sure that the whole bit where Oz turned out to be a regular dude just trying to scare everyone was going to hold true.

The Scarecrow, however, was taking the gatekeeper's comments much more seriously than I was. "But it is not a foolish errand, nor an idle one," he said. "It is important. And we have been told that Oz is a good wizard."

"So he is," said the man, "and he rules the Emerald City wisely and well. But to those who are not honest, or who approach him from curiosity, he is most terrible, and few have ever dared ask to see his face. I am the Guardian of the Gates, and since you demand to see the Great Oz I must take you to his palace. But first you must put on the spectacles."

"Wait, what?" I said. "Why?"

"Because if you did not wear spectacles, the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind you. Even those who live in the City must wear spectacles night and day. They are all locked on, for Oz so ordered it when the City was first built, and I have the only key that will unlock them."

Once again, that sounded like a load of crap to me. But if we needed to put on sunglasses to get the plot moving, I was okay with it. The gatekeeper opened the big green box, and it was filled with green sunglasses of all shapes and sizes. He found a pair that would fit each of us—even Toto—and set the glasses carefully on our faces, locking them in the back with a miniature key that he wore on a chain around his neck. I wasn't thrilled about having something permanently affixed to my face, but if Gate Guy

really was telling the truth, it was probably for the best. I knew myself well enough to know that if given the option, I wouldn't be able to resist a peek.

Once we were all bespectacled, the Guardian of the Gates put on his own glasses and was ready to show us to the palace. Taking a big golden key from a peg on the wall, he opened another gate, and we all followed him through the portal into the streets of the Emerald City.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WONDERFUL CITY OF OZ.

My initial reaction to the Emerald City was that the glasses didn't work for shit, because I was damn near blinded by the sheer gaudiness of it all. It was all marble columns and sparkly curtains, and there were emeralds embedded into EVERYTHING. Someone had Bedazzled THE FUCK out of that place. Like, if Elvis Presley and Liberace had a same-sex-marriage love baby, and sent it off to Donald Fucking Trump for style tips, the poor son of a bitch STILL would have been fired from his job decorating this place for being too understated.

I assumed that everything was painted green as well, although it was impossible to tell, considering that even the sun, the sky, and the skin on the back of my own hand looked green through my—

Sunglasses. Oh my god. That was the whole point of them. The goddamned Wizard must have said he was casting a spell to make the city green, then locked tinted lenses on everyone's faces so they wouldn't know he was full of shit. I mean, that was way worse than the mildly roguish snake oil salesman/balloon enthusiast from the movie.

The Wizard of Oz in this version was a fucking *dick*.

The Guardian of the Gates led us through the streets until we came to a huge palace dead in the center of town, which was somehow even more garish than the rest of the City. The door was guarded by a soldier with a green uniform and a green beard (or possibly not, because who could even fucking tell).

"Here are strangers," said the Gate Guardian, "and they demand to see the Great Oz."

"Step inside," the soldier answered, "and I will carry your message to him."

Well, that went better than I expected. He led us to a big waiting room

(I'm not even going to bother describing the decor), made us wipe our feet, and politely excused himself to go announce our presence to his boss.

He took forever to return. "I spoke to the Great and Powerful Oz through the door and gave him your message," the soldier said when he finally showed up. "He said he will grant you an audience, if you so desire. But each one of you must enter his presence alone, and he will admit but one each day. Therefore, you must remain in the palace for several days. I will have you shown to rooms where you may rest in comfort after your journey."

"Ugh, fine," I said, and turned to the Cowardly Lion. "The good news is, this guy *definitely* has social anxiety meds."

The soldier blew a whistle, and a girl about my age in a silk gown entered. "Follow me and I will show you your room," she said.

She had separate rooms for all of us, and mine was as tacky as you'd expect—velvet curtains, flowers in all the windows, and an honest-to-God marble fountain right in the middle of the room. There was a shelf of books (I secretly hoped one would be titled *The Mall in Calabasas*, but no dice) and a closet full of dresses that would probably fit the ten-year-old Dorothy just right.

"Make yourself perfectly at home," the girl said, "and if you wish for anything ring the bell."

"Ring, ring," I said. "I'm going to tell you straight-up that my clothes need to be washed *at least* twice. Also, send food—meat pies, if you have them. *All the meat pies*."

"Of course," she said with a smile that actually seemed genuine. "You'll be fed at once, and your clothes laundered while you rest. Oz will send for you tomorrow morning."

The bed, at least, was plush as hell. After my pie feast I collapsed into it, but even with Toto curled up at my feet, I felt weirdly alone. It seemed I was actually growing accustomed to falling asleep with the Scarecrow staring creepily down at me, the Woodsman chopping away endlessly through the night, and the big, stinky Lion purring like a leaf blower.

Whatever. I was almost at the end of this stupid voyage through literature, anyway.

After breakfast the next morning (fancy toast and delicate poached eggs on a sparkling, hideous platter), the girl returned for me. She brought my freshly washed laundry, which seemed to look like olden-time little-girl clothes to her, even as she folded them into perfect squares—the physical logistics of the whole Dorothy disguise business continued to baffle me. Also, she really, *really* wanted to dress me up in stuff from the closet, but I refused. I finally let her tie a ribbon around Toto's neck, which seemed to satisfy her.

The hall outside Oz's throne room was full of women and men decked out in elaborate gowns and waistcoats, who evidently showed up to hang out with each other every day even though they were never let in to see the Wizard.

"Are you really going to look upon the face of Oz the Terrible?" one woman whispered breathlessly.

"Yup."

She turned to the soldier who had let us in yesterday. "Will he see her?"

"Oh, he will," the soldier said. "Although he does not like to have people ask to see him. Indeed, at first he was angry and said I should send her back where she came from. Then he asked me what she looked like."

"Okay," I said. "Creepy."

Now he addressed me directly. "When I mentioned your silver shoes he was very much interested. At last I told him about the mark upon your forehead, and he decided he would admit you to his presence."

Ah, so my witch connections were the ticket. That made sense. A bell rang, and everyone in the hall tittered nervously. "That is the signal," the soldier said. "You must go into the throne room alone."

He opened a door and I marched inside to a big, round, high-arched chamber. I'm going to go ahead and let you guess what every surface was embedded with. There was a big, green throne right in the middle of it, and floating about a foot above it was a giant, bald head. It wasn't even a particularly scary head. I mean, it was probably six feet across, but other than its size it just looked like a regular bald guy.

Its mouth moved. "I am Oz, the Great and Terrible. Who are you, and why do you seek me?"

The voice was loud, but not overly threatening. And I couldn't really tell if it was supposed to be coming from the giant head or from a speaker somewhere. I decided I should probably just play this one straight.

"I'm Arabella, although people around here mostly call me Dorothy. It's kind of a long story. I'm here to ask for a favor."

The head stared at me silently for at least a minute. Several wise-ass

comments sprung to mind while I waited for him to get on with it, but I managed to hold my tongue.

"Where did you get the silver shoes?" he asked at last.

"From the Wicked Witch of the East, when my house fell on her and killed her," I replied. "By accident."

"Where did you get the mark upon your forehead?"

"A super-old witch kissed me there. From the North, I think? Then she told me to come see you."

Word on the street was that the Wizard could tell just by looking whether or not I was speaking the truth, and he stared at me like he was certainly trying. "What do you wish me to do?" he finally asked.

"Send me back to Kansas," I said. "And by 'Kansas,' I mean the mall in Calabasas, California. At the exact same moment I left, if at all possible. I mean, no offense or anything, but the Land of Oz kind of sucks."

I didn't *actually* expect him to grant my wish at this stage—in the movie he sends Dorothy to kill the Wicked Witch first, and then after she does he admits that he pretty much thought he was sending her to her doom, and that he's a phony who can't grant wishes anyway. But then he does grant wishes. Kind of. There's a hot air balloon involved, and Glinda the Good Witch has to swoop in and actually get Dorothy out of there. But I had already tried to skip ahead to the end once without any success, so I figured my best bet was to play along with the story as best I could.

His eyes blinked three times, then looked up and down and started rolling around independently of each other. To be honest, it was kind of freaking me out. Eventually, they focused back on me.

"And why should I do this for you?"

Because if you don't I'll expose your fraudulent ass to the entire, hideous green city? Blackmail probably wasn't the best opening move, I decided. And it was definitely WAY off script—if he felt like I was threatening him, shit could probably go real bad, real fast.

"Because I'm just a helpless, meek little girl," I said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice and failing miserably. "And you're an all-powerful, super-manly Wizard Head who can grant wishes if he wants."

"But you were strong enough to kill the Wicked Witch of the East," he said.

"That wasn't on purpose, and you know it."

"Well," he said, "I will give you my answer. You have no right to expect

me to send you back to Kansas unless you do something for me in return. In this country everyone must pay for everything he gets."

Awesome. He was a *Libertarian*. Also, he was full of shit. I hadn't paid for a goddamn thing since I'd been there.

"If you wish me to use my magic power to send you home again, you must do something for me first," he continued. "Help me and I will help you."

"Let me guess," I said. "Kill the Wicked Witch of the West."

"Kill the Wicked Witch of the West," he agreed.

"Yeah, I'm not sure I can do that."

"You killed the Witch of the East and you wear the silver shoes, which bear a powerful charm. There is now but one Wicked Witch left in all this land, and when you can tell me she is dead I will send you back to Kansas. But not before."

"If you want her dead so bad, *you* kill her," I said. "Unless, of course, you're asking me to do something that you're not powerful enough to do yourself."

"You have my answer," Oz said, "and until the Wicked Witch dies you will not see your home again. Remember that the Witch is Wicked—*tremendously* Wicked—and *ought* to be killed. Now go, and do not ask to see me again until you have done your task."

And that was that. Whether he wanted me out of the way and assumed the Witch would do his dirty work for him, or was just part of my KGB brainwashing (or, for that matter, he genuinely hoped to save his loyal subjects from the potential wrath of an old woman in green pancake makeup and a pointy hat), I had my marching orders. It was probably good that he was making us wait around a whole day between individual interviews, because I needed some time to figure out how I was going to play this.

I was led back to the sitting room, where the Scarecrow, Woodsman, and Lion were waiting eagerly. "He won't help me unless I murder another witch," I said. It turned out they hadn't all heard the story about the first witch murder, so I had to explain that a little bit, at which point they were properly mortified about the Wizard's unfair demands, and did their best to comfort me.

Then I went back to my room to eat meat pies, flick green flower petals into the fountain, and think.

There was too much I didn't know about my situation—did I need to complete the book's plot to get out? If I went wildly off script, would I break the simulation? Would that be good or bad? And most importantly, if I died in the Oz Matrix, would I die in real life? I was still a little concerned about the whole brainwashing angle, but if that was their plan—"they" being the curvy, middle-aged librarian in the mall shop, I guess?—I was pretty sure it wasn't working. I wasn't going to kill anybody just because I was ordered to, and if they set up some shitty scenario where I had no choice but to do it, that wasn't on me, it was on them.

After breakfast the following morning, I was escorted to the sitting room again, where the Lion and Woodsman were already waiting. It was the Scarecrow's turn to see Oz, and apparently he had already been in there a good half hour by the time I had finished eating. When he returned from his audience, he looked a bit shaken.

"How was the big, giant head?" I asked.

"He appeared to me not as the floating face you described," the Scarecrow said, "but as a most lovely Lady, dressed in green silk gauze, and wore upon her flowing green locks a crown of jewels. Growing from her shoulders were wings, gorgeous in color and so light that they fluttered if the slightest breath of air reached them."

Okay, that was new.

"She spoke to me very sweetly, but insisted that she was Oz, the Great and Terrible, and demanded to know my name and my purpose."

"And I assume she told you to kill the witch too?"

"She told me that if I did, she would bestow upon me a great many brains, and such good brains that I would be the wisest man in all the Land of Oz. I was surprised that she required of me the very same task she did of you, but she said she didn't care who killed the Witch, as long as she was dead. And that once she was, I would have my wish."

The Scarecrow seemed even more bent out of shape about the prospect of witch killing than I was. By this point I had grown pretty bored of my room—posh-ass bed and all—so I spent the rest of the day poking around the city. I half expected to find some dark undercurrent beneath the glittering green façades, but none emerged. The people all seemed genuinely chipper, and thoroughly enamored of life in the Emerald City. So I swung by the gatehouse to make sure I wasn't technically a prisoner during my stay, but the Gate Guardian said he'd be perfectly content to take

my tinted sunglasses back and send me on my way. If anything, he seemed like he'd be glad to be rid of me.

There was nothing to do but wait. The following morning it was the Woodsman's turn.

"I do not know if I shall find Oz a lovely Lady or a Head, but I hope it will be the lovely Lady," he said. "For if it is the Head, I am sure I shall not be given a heart, since a head has no heart of its own and therefore cannot feel for me. But if it is the lovely Lady I shall beg hard for a heart, for all ladies are themselves said to be kindly hearted."

"Dude, *really*? How did you lose your ENTIRE BODY in the first place?" I shot him tiny knives with my glare. "Shut up and go see the stupid Wizard."

Tin Woodsman did both, which gave me time to ponder the current state of my inappropriate robot crush. Well, inappropriate from *his* side, anyway —I wasn't about to apologize for the places my mind went when I gazed at his gleaming, mechanical hips. But I had to keep reminding myself that when he looked at me, he saw the same ten-year-old Dorothy Gale who was in the mirror every time I checked.

Obviously it had been lust at first sight from the moment I'd seen his rusted ass immobilized over that stump in the woods. And the endless pining for his lost heart—not to mention the almost eager way he was prepared to see his friends come to a poetically tragic end—still struck me as endearing rather than pathetic. Which was how I knew I had it bad. But something about the wildcat incident had thrown me for a loop, and I was trying to figure out what it was. I mean, he saved a helpless mouse (mouse royalty, no less) from being *literally devoured*. That sort of thing should have seemed straight-up *heroic*, right?

The thing was, any amount of cat-beheading, especially from a guy who cried his face shut when he *stepped on a freaking bug*, was a giant, flashing, neon-red flag. I decided that my misgivings came from the fact that I hadn't been awake to see him do it. Was he saddened by the horrible action the predator had forced him to take? Or had he done it with a little *gleam* in his eye, like cutting the heads off stuff was his whole deal, and he was excited that he finally had the opportunity?

When the Woodsman eventually returned, he looked shaken. "It was neither Head nor Lady," he said. "Oz took the shape of a most terrible Beast! It was nearly as big as an elephant, and the throne seemed hardly

strong enough to hold its weight. The Beast had a head like that of a rhinoceros, only there were five eyes in its face."

"Yikes," I said. "Did he ask you to—"

"And five long arms growing out of its body! And five long, slim legs. Thick, woolly hair covered every part of it. A more dreadful-looking monster could not be imagined! Being only tin, I was not at all afraid, although I was much disappointed."

"Because you were hoping for the hot girl."

"I was, yes."

"And when he asked you to kill the Wicked Witch—"

"In a voice that was one great roar!"

"Right. Did he say you had to do it alone? I mean, is he pitting us *against* each other? Or did he say we could do it together, and have all our wishes granted?"

The Woodsman stopped to think for a moment. "No, he specifically stated that if I helped you kill the Wicked Witch of the West, he would then give me the biggest and kindest and most loving heart in all the Land of Oz."

Good to know. Now it was back to the waiting game. After one more PAINFULLY boring day, made bearable only by meaty, saucy goodness on demand, it was the Lion's turn at last. He had spent most of his downtime with the Scarecrow and Woodsman, trying to guess what form the wizard would take today.

"If he is a Beast when I go to see him," the Lion said, "I shall roar my loudest, and so frighten him that he will grant all I ask. If he is the lovely Lady, I shall pretend to spring upon her, and so compel her to do my bidding. And if he is the great Head, he will be at my mercy; for I will roll this head all about the room until he promises to give us what we desire. So be of good cheer, my friends, for all will yet be well."

"Cowardly." Uh huh.

About half an hour later, when he returned from the throne room, I was engaged in what had become my favorite pastime over the last few days—attempting in vain to teach the Scarecrow how to curse.

"Okay, repeat after me," I said. "Two tears in a bucket."

"Two tears in a bucket."

"Motherfuck it."

"Futher mucket."

The Lion burst into the room. "He was neither Head, Lady, *nor* Beast!" he said.

"You guys owe me five bucks each," I said to the Woodsman and Scarecrow.

"He was a Ball of Fire, so fierce and glowing I could scarcely bear to gaze upon it. The heat was so intense that I singed my whiskers!"

"And?"

"He said that if I brought him proof that the Wicked Witch was dead, at that moment he would give me courage. But as long as the Witch lives, I must remain a coward."

I had very much seen this coming, but I guess the others had been holding out hope for better news. "What shall we do now?" the Woodsman asked.

"There is only one thing we can do," the Lion said somberly. "And that is to go to the land of the Winkies, seek out the Wicked Witch, and destroy her."

My first thought was to ask what the hell a *Winkie* was, but I put a pin in it. The truth was, I'd had plenty of time to consider my options while loitering in the Emerald City, and I had come to the conclusion that there was no avoiding the Wicked Witch of the West. Of course, I wasn't in any way committed to assassinating the woman—if she was just some ugly old bat who the patriarchy had labeled "wicked" because she was tired of putting up with their shit, then more power to her. Maybe *she* would be willing to bargain with me for a ticket out of this dump.

But if she really was as horrible as everyone said—enslaving Winkies, bringing death and destruction with her everywhere she went, yadda yadda —well, then I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. The thing was, I had genuinely grown to like the Lion, Woodsman, and Scarecrow during our travels together. And, a little casual mauling and the occasional beheaded wildcat aside, they were three of the bravest, gentlest, kindest souls I had ever met. If the whole Witch thing went pear-shaped, I wasn't sure I could live with myself if I made a murderer out of any of them.

"I've decided to go and see this Witch for myself, and to make up my own mind as to whether she needs destroying," I said. "If any of you don't want to be a part of this, you don't have to come. When I return,"—when, I corrected myself at the last second, not *if*—"I'll tell the Wizard you all helped, and that he should grant each of you your wish."

"I will go with you," the Lion said without hesitation. "But I'm too much of a coward to kill the Witch."

"I will go too," declared the Scarecrow, "but I shall not be of much help to you, I am such a fool."

"I haven't the heart to harm even a Witch," Tin Woodsman said. "but if you go, I certainly shall go with you."

My own, stupid heart swelled up, and I got some kind of stupid emerald dust or something in my eye. "Then it's decided," I said. "We leave at dawn to the domain of the Wicked Witch, on the orders of some guy we barely know, who in all honesty, seems like kind of an ass."

There was a long pause.

"Futhermucking wizard," the Scarecrow said.

"Futhermucking wizard," I agreed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SEARCH FOR THE WICKED WITCH.

Back at the gates to the Emerald City, Guardian Dude unlocked our glasses and put them back in the box (without even spraying them down like they do with shoes at the bowling alley—mine were crusted with four days worth of sweat, and I can't even IMAGINE what the Lion's smelled like).

"Okay," I said. "Which road do we take for the Wicked Witch of the West?"

"There is no road," he said. "No one ever wishes to go that way."

Of course there wasn't. "So how do we get to her?"

"That will be easy," he said cheerfully. "She has but one eye, and it is as powerful as a telescope, and can see everywhere. When she knows you are in the country of the Winkies she will find you, and make you all her slaves."

"Perhaps not," the Scarecrow said. "For we mean to destroy her."

"Maybe," I corrected him. "We mean to destroy her maybe."

"Oh, that is different," the Guardian said. "No one has ever destroyed her before, so I naturally thought she would make slaves of you, as she has of the rest. But take care, for she is wicked and fierce, and may not allow you to destroy her. Keep to the west, where the sun sets, and you cannot fail to find her." I usually have a pretty good ear for disdain, but I genuinely couldn't tell if he was fucking with us or not. So I just thanked him and we headed due west, straight into an unplowed field.

The "green" bow Concierge Girl had tied around Toto's neck now looked white as the driven snow, which amazed my three companions to no end. I spent the better part of the morning trying to explain the concept of tinted sunglasses to them, but finally gave up.

As we trudged on through the afternoon, the ground became rougher and hillier. Also, there seemed to be zero trees west of the Emerald City, and I'm pretty sure it was *at least* twenty degrees hotter in that direction. I was exhausted well before sunset. The truth was, I hadn't slept much the night before, and even though I was so close to getting home I could practically *taste it*, I wasn't particularly looking forward to this next part.

I decided that we'd call it a day, and the Lion enthusiastically agreed, falling to his belly on the spot. I lay down and curled up against his already-snoring, stinky hide. After four nights in the softest bed ever, I figured going back to sleeping in the wild might take a little...

I was out like a light before I could even finish the thought. Alas, it was barely sundown when I was jarred awake by the sound of the Scarecrow's scream.

"WOOOOOLVES!"

I scrambled to my feet in a half-blind panic, but slipped on the rough grass and fell. In the light of the setting sun, the Woodsman was attempting to calm his friend.

"This is my fight," he said. "Get behind me and I will meet them as they come."

From somewhere out of my line of vision, a low, rough voice growled. "The witch says that none of you are fit to work," it said. "So we may tear you into small pieces."

The Tin Woodsman seized his axe just as the wolf lunged toward him, and swung his arm in a wide arc, chopping the animal's head clean from its body. As soon as he could raise his arm again, a second wolf attacked, and also fell under the sharp edge of the Woodsman's weapon. There were forty wolves, and forty times the axe fell, until they all lay dead in a heap before him.

The Woodsman dropped his axe and fell to his knees.

"It was a good fight, friend," the Scarecrow said. The Woodsman turned his head and I saw that his face was a mask of grief, tears streaking down his cheeks. There was no secret, sadistic pleasure hiding behind that expression.

These were the lengths he would go to protect me.

I rushed to his side to wipe his face with my hoodie before he rusted, but he flinched at my touch. "Go back to sleep, my child," he said. "The Wicked Witch won't have expected her attack to fail. We'll be safe until

morning."

"I, uh..." He clearly needed some time to himself. "I'll just go relax over there. Away from the... *pile*."

"I'll come with you, to stand watch," the Scarecrow said.

The Woodsman nodded. "And I shall bury the bodies."

I went back to the Lion—who of course had slept soundly through the entire ordeal—but, needless to say, lay awake restlessly for most of the night. When dawn came at last, there was nothing to do but make a little breakfast of the meat pies I had squirrelled away in my basket and continue our journey.

We had barely walked an hour when a small, black cloud approached from the west. As it came closer, I could see that it was in fact a flock of crows, rushing straight toward us.

"This is *my* battle," the Scarecrow said, "so lie down beside me and cover your eyes, and you will not be harmed."

We did as he said—even the Lion, although I felt like he was big enough that he could probably hold his own against a handful of birds—and the Scarecrow stood up tall and stretched out his arms. The crows scattered, not daring to come near. Because, you know, they were *crows*, and scaring them was pretty much the Scarecrow's whole deal.

Alas, the crows had a king, who was apparently brighter and braver than the rest. "It is only a stuffed man," he cawed. "I will peck his eyes out."

The King Crow flew at the Scarecrow, who caught it by the head and snapped its neck with one swift motion.

Holy shit, *that was badass*. I mean, not as badass as decapitating wolves, but still. Another crow flew at him, and the Scarecrow twisted its neck also. There were forty crows, and forty times the Scarecrow twisted a neck, until at last all were lying dead beside him.

Maybe I really *was* getting desensitized to violence, or maybe crows just didn't warrant as much sympathy as big, hundred-pound mammals, but I wasn't nearly as shaken up as I had been the previous night. The Scarecrow, for his part, also seemed like he was pretty much okay with it. We left the pile of birds where it was and continued on.

The Witch had presumably been watching closely with her freaky telescope eye, because before long we heard a soft buzzing coming from the west.

"Bees!" I looked around at my companions. "Okay, which one of you

guys is an expert at killing bees?"

"Not I," the Lion said. "I am allergic to bees! Or at the very least, quite afraid of them."

"Take out my straw and scatter it over Dorothy and Toto and the Lion," the Scarecrow said to the Woodsman, "so the bees cannot sting them."

"Okay, that can't possibly work," I said. "The Lion is *way* bigger than you are—how much stuffing is even *in* there? Also, I'm *pretty sure* bees can sting through straw."

The Woodsman was already grabbing fistfuls of straw from the Scarecrow's torso, however, and before long he had somehow managed to cover us completely. Evidently the land of Oz operated mostly on *cartoon* physics. He tucked the Scarecrow's head into my straw-covered arm to hold.

"See?" the Scarecrow said. I could feel his face *wiggling* as he spoke. "It's a foolproof plan."

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Sure enough, when bees arrived they found no one but the Woodsman to sting, so they flew at him and broke off all their stingers against his shiny metal ass without hurting him the slightest bit. And they were the kind of bees that couldn't live without their stingers, too, because they all fell to the ground, dead. When I poked my head out of the straw they lay scattered thick about the Woodsman in tiny little heaps.

We stuffed the Scarecrow back up until he was as good as ever, and started upon our journey once more. This time we walked uninterrupted for several hours, until we spotted a dozen men and women with long, pointed spears marching toward us.

The Winkies, I presumed? They just looked like regular men and women. In fact, as they got closer, they all appeared pretty scruffy and underfed. I guess their favorite color was yellow, because they were dressed in it from head to toe, although their clothes were tattered and torn.

The Cowardly Lion bounded toward them. *Oh, crap. Please don't kill the Winkies, please don't kill the Winkies.* Then I realized I could say it out loud.

"Lion! DO NOT kill the Winkies!"

He stopped in his tracks and let out a mighty roar. The poor Winkies were so frightened that they turned and ran as fast as they could, disappearing into the hills.

"Is it just me," I said, "or are these attacks getting lamer and lamer as they go?"

As if to answer my question, the sky darkened to the west, and we heard a low rumbling in the air.

"More crows?" the Tin Woodsman asked. As the dark patch of sky came closer, there was a rushing of wings, and a great chattering and laughing.

Oh, shit. Flying. Fucking. Monkeys.

Each one was nearly as big as me, and their massive, greasy black wings blotted out the sun. The flying monkeys were *terrifying*. Two of them swooped out of the sky and snatched up the Scarecrow, pulling all of the straw out of his clothes and head with their long fingers. They made his clothes into a small bundle and threw it into the top branches of a tree.

I'm not terribly proud of it, but I screamed.

Other monkeys threw lengths of rope around the Lion and wound the coils around his body, head, and legs until he was unable to bite or scratch or struggle in any way. Then they lifted him up and flew away with him to the west.

Three more monkeys seized the Tin Woodsman and flew him high into the sky. I watched as they carried him toward a patch of rough terrain off toward the horizon, and dropped him to fall helplessly to the jagged rocks far below.

"Nooooooooooo!"

The biggest, ugliest flying monkey of them all flew toward me, his long, hairy arms stretched out and his face grinning terribly. At the last moment, however, he veered away.

"We dare not harm this girl," he said to others. "For she is protected by the Power of Good, and that is greater than the Power of Evil. All we can do is to carry her to the castle of the Wicked Witch and leave her there."

So, carefully and gently, they lifted me in their grimy paws and carried me for miles through the air to the witch's castle, where they plopped me right down on the front doorstep.

The Wicked Witch of the West didn't look anything like she did in the movie. She was small and decrepit, sported an eye patch, and wore her hair in big, rough braids. Instead of a pointy hat, she had a goofy golden cap studded with diamonds and rubies. She wore a big, heavy wool coat, and a black skirt decorated with flowers, frogs, and moons.

"We have obeyed you as far as we were able," the biggest monkey said. "The Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow are destroyed, and the Lion is tied up in your yard. The little girl we dare not harm, nor the dog she carries in her arms. Your power over our band is now ended, and you will never see us again."

Then all the winged monkeys, laughing and chattering away, flew off and disappeared into the sky.

Destroyed. It *couldn't* be true. I'd already seen the scarecrow emptied out and restuffed again, none the worse for wear. And the Woodsman... *he's tough*, I assured myself. I'd find him and hammer out his dents myself, and he'd be just as good as new. Right?

Right?

The Witch glared at me, then glared at my silver shoes even harder, and actually gasped. "Come with me," she said. "And see that you mind everything I tell you. For if you do not I will make an end of you, as I did of the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow."

Fuck you, I thought. Fuuuuuuuuuuuuk yooooooouuuuuu.

She led me through her castle—which was actually quite posh on the inside—until we got to the kitchen, where she told me to sweep the floor and keep the fire fed until it came time for dinner. The first thing I did—believe me—was check the sink, but there was no faucet, and it was dry. Evidently they carted the water in from somewhere else.

The Witch stormed off, leaving me alone. But I sure as hell wasn't going to hang around and do her janitorial work. I backtracked to the castle gates, only to find two sad-looking Winkie guards with spears blocking my exit. They may or may not have been two of the same ones we'd encountered in the fields earlier that day—it was hard to tell under all those tattered yellow clothes.

"Out of my way," I said forcefully. "See this mark on my head? Good Witch Kiss. If you even touch me, that shit will *mess you up*."

I had no idea if any of that was true or not. But the first guard just lowered his spear. "The Wicked Witch commands that we stop you from leaving, even if doing so will surely strike us dead. We must obey the Wicked Witch."

"Bullshit!" I said. "I saw you guys turn and run when the Lion roared at you. Just run away!"

The guard shook his head. "That was blind terror, and our bodies fled of

their own volition, quite beyond our control." Now I could see that he was trying to hold back tears. "This is more of an... *existential dread*. If I try to stop you, and you strike me down, the next Winkie will be struck down after me. And the next one after him."

The other guard—the next Winkie, apparently—just stared at me and shook his head in fear. *Jesus Christ*. Okay, maybe I'd go see if the castle had a back door. My plan was to get free, go revive the Scarecrow and the Woodsman, then come back, rescue the Lion, and figure out what to do about the Witch. I lurked through the corridors as quietly as I could—fucking Toto would occasionally bark at a Winkie patrol, but they mostly pretended not to see us and hurried along their way.

I eventually found an unguarded doorway into what appeared to be a courtyard. The Witch was there, waving a bunch of leather straps or something in front of a sturdy iron gate.

"If I cannot harness you," she said, "I can starve you. You shall have nothing to eat until you do as I wish!"

From the other side of the gate, the Cowardly Lion growled. "If you come in this yard, I swear that I will eat *you*."

The witch howled and turned away from him. "You!" she said when she spotted me sneaking up behind her. "Done with the sweeping, are you?" She glanced down at my shoes and grimaced. Then, suddenly, her face lit up.

"Well, you're filthy. Time for your bath! Go and get washed up, and then you shall have your dinner."

"My bath? Like, in a tub? Of water?"

"Yes, yes!" the Witch said. "The bath is on the top floor, just atop the stairs. You can't miss it!" She hurried back into the castle, giggling to herself along the way.

I ran to the gate, but it led only to a closed area, where the Lion lay, quietly weeping. The gate was chained tight with a massive iron padlock. "Hold on," I said.

He looked up. "Dorothy?"

"Yeah! Or, you know, whatever."

He leapt toward the gate. "I was certain she had killed you!"

"It's good to see you, too. I have to go real quick, but I'll be back! I'll have you free in no time."

I was pretty sure the Witch's plan was to steal my shoes while I was

taking a bath, but if there was water in that tub... Well, a lot of things in this book were different than they were in the movie, but a lot of things were *the same*. And I knew *exactly* what happened when Dorothy dumped water on the Wicked Witch in the movie version.

I found the bathroom at the top of the stairs, and, sure enough, there were two big buckets of water next to the tub, one steaming hot and the other cold. I rushed across the floor toward them—and tripped over something, stumbling to the floor.

One of my silver shoes went skittering across the tile, and the Wicked Witch leapt from her hiding place behind a curtain, snatched it up, and put it in her own gnarled foot.

An iron bar, made invisible by some kind of spell, appeared on the floor. The witch cackled with glee. "Now half the shoes' charm is mine, and you cannot use it against me!"

That was her big, scary magic plan? An invisible *tripping hazard*? "Give me back my shoe," I said.

"I will not," she retorted. "For it is now my shoe, and not yours."

Now I was pissed. "Give me back my shoe, and set the Lion free, and let us both leave this place to go find our friends."

"Fool," she said. "I told you, your friends are dead."

"They're not!"

Her one eye opened wide, and wiggled around a bit. "I can see them myself! The Scarecrow's straw is scattered to the winds, and the Tin Woodman lays at the bottom of a ravine, smashed beyond repair. The spells that once animated them have been broken! They're dead, dead! And once that charm on your forehead has faded, you'll join them, and your little dog, t—"

I dumped the bucket of hot water right on top of her head.

She gave a screech, and then instantly began to shrink and fall away.

"See what you have done!" she screamed. "Didn't you know water would be the end of me?"

"Of course I fucking knew."

She shrieked again, and I dumped the second bucket over her until she had melted away completely. This wasn't some special effect with a trap door, either—there was melted witch *everywhere*. I fetched my shoe, wiped the witch goo out of it, and made my way back to the courtyard to free the Lion.

"The Wicked Witch has met her end," I told him when I got there. "Also, I *might* be a mind-controlled KGB assassin."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RESCUE.

The Lion was thrilled to hear the witch had been melted, and didn't understand the part about the KGB, so once I flagged down a befuddled Winkie to fetch his key, he was pleased as punch.

"If only our friends, the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman, were with us," he said, "I should be quite happy."

Meanwhile, the Winkies were just about losing their shit. I hadn't heard a single musical number the entire time I'd been in Oz, but I could swear they were just on the verge of breaking out into a chorus of "Ding Dong, the Witch is Dead."

Several dozen of them had gathered in the courtyard. "From this day forward," one of them decreed, "We shall keep this date as a holiday to honor the one who freed us from bondage. The Feast of Dorothy!"

"The Feast of Dorothy!" the others cheered.

"How about the Feast of Arabella?" I said. "I just like the sound of it better. And before you start with the merrymaking, do you think you could help us find our friends?"

The Winkies were more than delighted to mount a search party. I explained that one was a bundle of clothes tied to the top of a tree near where the flying monkeys had captured us, and the other was made of tin, and possibly laying in the bottom of a ravine.

They sent their brightest and fastest to comb the countryside, but it was slow going. Fortunately, the Witch's castle was even more comfortable than our rooms in the Emerald City had been. Late on our third day, I was in the kitchen trying to explain to the cooks what a proper meat pie should look like (the closest they had come so far was sort of a pile of beef on top of a flaky pastry crust, which actually tasted pretty good, but would hardly travel well).

There was a sudden commotion out in the hallway. "We've found the Tin Man!" someone shouted.

I rushed out to greet them, and saw the Cowardly Lion bounding in from across the castle. Four Winkies tenderly carried the Woodsman in their arms, but he didn't look good. His body was battered and bent, and his eyes were open, staring, lifeless. A fifth Winkie carried his axe on her shoulder, but the blade was rusted and the handle broken off short.

I struggled to keep my composure. "In Munchkinland," I stuttered. "A *tinsmith*. A really good tinsmith..."

"Oh, we Winkies are famous for our smithery!" the woman with the axe said. "I'm sure we can straighten out those dents, and bend him back into shape again, and weld him together where he is broken! Give us time, and we shall mend him so he will be as good as ever."

They set up shop in a big, yellow room in the castle, hammering and twisting and bending and soldering and polishing and pounding the hell out of the Tin Woodsman. It was not quick work, however. Three more days passed, and four more nights, until a Winkie messenger arrived with news of the Scarecrow.

"We've found the tree at last!" he said. "Alas, it is a very tall tree, and the trunk is so smooth that none of us can climb it."

"Then I suppose I'll have to chop that *futhermucker* down," a familiar voice said from behind me.

The Tin Woodsman swept me up in a huge embrace, and he was crying, and I was crying, and the Lion appeared from somewhere and was also crying, and trying so hard to wipe the tears off the Woodsman's face with his tail that it became sopping wet, and he had to go out and dry it in the courtyard. The Winkie Tinsmiths had done excellent work. Sure, there was a bit of rough soldering, and some sections of him looked a little patched, but if anything, it made him look *rugged*. His joints worked just as well as ever, and, more importantly, he was his same old tragic, emo self.

He went on for several minutes about how he had been certain that he'd been *abandoned forever*, and the very specific details of his imagined destiny, broken to pieces on the jagged rocks. "But listen to me," he said at last, "wasting time when there is precious little time to waste! We must hurry to save our friend the Scarecrow, lest he should suffer the fate I have very happily avoided!"

Unfortunately, the trip was *much* longer by foot than by flying monkey,

and it would take several days just to reach the Scarecrow's tree. "I shall make the journey alone," the Woodsman said. "For I can travel night and day without tiring, and cut the time in half."

"We shall post footmen along your path, and keep them well-rested, so you shall always have a fresh guide to lead your way," the Winkie messenger said. "The land around this castle has fallen to ruin, and in the bleak countryside it is treacherously easy to lose one's way."

The Winkies brought the Woodsman his axe—while the tinsmiths had been repairing him, other craftsmen had been polishing it, and fitting it with a handle made of solid gold. It was kind of nuts. Then he made his farewells, and there was nothing for the Lion and I to do but settle in and continue freeloading.

It was a *terrible* imposition.

After three full days, the Woodsman returned with the Scarecrow's clothes (including, thankfully, his emptied-out face sack, which was somehow looked even creepier than when it was properly stuffed). Now all we could hope was that whatever enchantment had brought him to life was on the cloth, and not in the stuffing, which was long gone by the time the Woodsman had reached him.

The Scarecrow's repairs were much quicker than the Tin Woodsman's had been—we crammed him full of straw from the Lion's bedding, and he bounded to life, good as ever. There were more hugs, more tears, and more wiping and soaking and drying of tails. The Winkies seemed every bit as delighted as the four of us were.

"Now may we begin the Feast of Arabella?" one of them asked.

"Yes, now you may begin the Feast of Arabella."

The Feast of Arabella, I have to say, was *raging*. There was music, and dancing, and drink, and proper meat pies that put the original Munchkin delicacies to shame. I have no idea how long the revelry lasted, but at some point I collapsed, only to awaken the following morning and discover that the festivities were still going strong. The Scarecrow and Woodsman, as tireless as ever, had partied straight through the night.

They took a break to join the Lion and me at our breakfast, and the Woodsman sighed. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I think I'd be content to stay in this castle forever."

It was a really nice castle. I considered the prospect. There certainly wasn't anything back in Calabasas that compared to this life of luxury,

being waited on by grateful Winkies hand and foot. I thought about Madeline, though, and my Mom. The thing was, none of this quite felt *real*. And, although I loved my new friends as much as I loved the characters in a really good book, I couldn't avoid the feeling that they weren't real either. Not *really*.

The thought came with a pang of loneliness. "I think we have to go back to the Emerald City," I said. "And make that Wizard pay up."

"Yes," the Woodsman said. "At last I shall get my heart!"

"And I shall get my brains!" added the Scarecrow joyfully.

"And I shall get my courage!" the Lion agreed.

And I shall get the fuck out of here, I thought. As much as I was going to miss the sporadic nice parts, it was time. "We'll head out tomorrow morning."

We informed the Winkies of our plan to leave, and they seemed genuinely heartbroken. The following day, they presented each of us with a gift. They gave Toto a golden collar, and me a bracelet studded with diamonds. They gave the Scarecrow a gold-headed walking stick, so he wouldn't fall over so much, which was pretty thoughtful. And they gave the Tin Woodsman a silver oil can, inlaid with gold and set with all different kinds of precious jewels. (They seemed *super* into the Tin Woodsman.)

They gave the Cowardly Lion a gold collar that looked just like Toto's but bigger, and by the look on his face I was afraid for a moment that he was going to bite one of them.

On the way out I swung by the kitchen to load up on snacks for the trip, and found the Witch's weird golden hat in one of the cupboards. I'm not above a little casual looting, so I stuffed it into my basket on a whim.

And with that, we were off.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WINGED MONKEYS.

The neighborhood surrounding the Witch's castle was *bleak as shit*. The sun rises in the east, though, so we kept it in front of us (and directly in our eyes, hooray), and plodded forward. Until about noon, when the sun had risen to its peak, and we had no idea where the hell we were going. We marched on as best we could—the Tin Woodsman had made this trip like two days before, but he was no help with directions at all—only to discover when the sun began sinking again that we had been traveling mostly south, and slightly back west, for at least an hour and a half. *Ugh*. We corrected course, but I wasn't sure if we should try to point a tiny bit northward to make up for lost time. The whole thing was a giant clusterfuck.

The next day was cloudy, and as much as we tried, we couldn't pinpoint the sun anywhere.

"Fuck it," I said. "We'll just walk, and if we don't find the Emerald City, at least we'll eventually run into something."

But the day passed away, and we didn't run into *shit*. "We have surely lost our way," the Scarecrow said mournfully. "And unless we find it again in time to reach the Emerald City, I shall never get my brains."

"Nor I my heart..." the Woodsman started.

"Jesus, can we *not* list all the things we're asking the Wizard for? Just this *once*?"

There was a brief pause. "I haven't the courage to keep tramping forever," the Cowardly Lion whispered, "without getting anywhere at all."

I plopped down onto the dirt and groaned. Toto sat beside me, and when a butterfly fluttered past his little head, he didn't have the energy to frolic around and chase it, even though that was pretty much his whole deal. Even though the day was overcast, it was somehow still blisteringly hot, so I tried in vain to fan myself with the Witch's gaudy-ass hat. "If anybody has any ideas," I said. "I'm all ears."

"Perhaps we could call upon the mice," the Woodsman said.

"What *mice*?"

"The field mice, who helped us rescue the Lion from the poppy field. Their Queen said we could call upon them any time, and they would be happy to aid us."

"Okay," I said. "Sure. How do we call the field mice?"

"With this whistle the queen gave me." He pulled out a little whistle on a chain, and blew it, making an almost inaudible sound.

"When did she give you a *whistle*?" I decided that it didn't matter. Within minutes, we heard the pattering of tiny feet, and mice came running up from every direction. Apparently one of them was the Queen herself, although I still couldn't really tell them apart.

"What can I do for my friends?" she asked in her squeaky mouse voice.

"We need directions," I said. "We're trying to get back to the Emerald City."

"Certainly," answered the Queen, "but it is a great way off, and you have had it at your backs all this time." Which, of course, begged the question of how the mice were able to get to us so quickly. Had they been *following us*?

But then the Queen noticed the Witch's hat. "Why don't you use the charm of the Cap, and call the Winged Monkeys to you? They will carry you to the City of Oz in less than an hour."

"Wait, what?"

"The spell is written inside the golden cap," she said. "But if you are going to call the Winged Monkeys we must run away, for they are full of mischief and think it great fun to plague us."

The whole business reminded me of some stupid computer game. I didn't play them much (because, like I said, *stupid*), but Madeline liked them, so I occasionally got stuck watching *her* play. And I couldn't escape the feeling that the mouse whistle was the cheat function, where you got a hint when you couldn't figure out what to do next.

Was I overthinking the whole thing? Sure, desensitizing you to wanton violence and forcing you into situations where you had to murder was probably how the KGB brainwashed assassins. But it also described most video games, as far as I could tell. If all this was just some super-advanced virtual reality game (again, possibly enhanced with hallucinogens?), I'd be

Well, I wasn't sure if I'd be relieved or pissed. But the idea did make me want to finally be done with it as soon as possible.

The Scarecrow and Woodsman were exchanging frightened glances and shaking their heads. "No Winged Monkeys," the Woodsman pleaded.

"Oh, do not worry," the Mouse Queen said. "They must obey the wearer of the Cap, and will not harm you. Goodbye!"

She scampered out of sight, with all the mice hurrying after her. I looked inside the Golden Cap, and sure enough, instructions were stitched in there, with some gibberish to speak and a small amount of hopping.

"Ep-pe, pep-pe, kak-ke," I said, standing on my left foot. I felt like an asshole.

"I don't know what that means," the Scarecrow said.

I ignored him, and continued the spell, shifting to my right foot. "Hil-lo, hol-lo, hel-lo."

"Hello!" The Woodsman waved back at me.

I hopped back onto both feet "Ziz-zy, zuz-zy, zik!" That was the end of it, and I immediately heard flapping wings, and the Flying Monkeys' trademark chattering. Moments later, the sky was riddled with them.

The Monkey King came in for a landing, and bowed at my feet, "What is your command?"

"Take us to the Emerald City," I said. "Carefully. And don't kill any of us this time."

"As you wish," he said. If he was at all bitter about being ordered around by a girl in a stupid hat, he certainly didn't show it. Another big monkey flew in, and the two of them picked me up gently and carried me into the sky. Others swooped down and lifted the Scarecrow, Woodsman and Lion. A smallish one picked up Toto, and damn near got himself bitten for his trouble.

Even by air, the trip wasn't short. Eventually I got bored with majestic vistas, and turned to the Monkey King.

"So what's the whole deal with the goofy hat?"

"That is a long story," he said. "But as we have a long journey before us, I will pass the time by telling you about it, if you wish."

Ugh. "Sure, why not."

"Once," he began, "we were a free people, living happily in the great forest, flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit, and doing just as we

pleased without calling anybody master."

The Monkey King wasn't kidding when he said that his story was long. But the gist of it was that there was a beautiful princess/powerful sorceress named Gayelette who everybody loved, but who couldn't find anyone to love in return because all the men were stupid and ugly, and she was probably a lesbian.

"At last, however," the Monkey King continued, "she found a boy who was handsome and manly and wise beyond his years. Gayelette made up her mind that when he grew to be a man she would make him her husband."

Ew. She took the kid back to her castle and basically raised him, and when he was eventually far enough past puberty, got ready to marry him. *Awesome*.

"My grandfather was at that time the King of the Winged Monkeys which lived in the forest near Gayelette's palace," the Monkey King said. "And the old fellow loved a joke better than a good dinner." So he picked up the Prince, or whatever he was, and dumped him in the river, which I guess seemed hilarious at the time. The Prince actually thought it was funny too, and was super chill about it, but Gayelette lost her shit, because the water *ruined his fancy clothes*.

At first I thought Gayelette sounded pretty cool, but clearly she was the worst. I remembered the Wicked Witch—powerful women in these old stories were *always* the worst. Imagine that. Anyway, Gayelette sentenced every single Flying Monkey to be tied up, dumped in the river and drowned. But the Prince talked her out of it, so instead they all agreed to grant three wishes to whoever owned the gold hat (it had been a wedding present or something) for all eternity.

Three wishes? "Hey, can you fly me all the way out of Oz, and back to my home in Calabasas?"

"That cannot be done," he said. "We belong to this country alone, and cannot leave it. There has never been a Winged Monkey in Calabasas yet, and I suppose there never will be, for they don't belong there." Well, it was worth a shot.

He finished his story. "The Prince was the first owner of the Golden Cap, and after he was married he ordered us always to fly far away and keep where the Princess could never again set eyes on a Winged Monkey. Which we were glad to do, for we were all afraid of her."

Fair enough. "This was all we ever had to do until the Golden Cap fell

into the hands of the Wicked Witch of the West," he continued. "She made us enslave the Winkies, and afterward drive Oz himself out of the Land of the West. Now the Golden Cap is yours, and three times you have the right to lay your wishes upon us."

And with that, we had arrived at the Emerald City. The Monkeys set us down carefully at the gates, the King bowed low, and they flew away. I decided that, if things went as planned and we were close to the end of this thing, I'd do that thing where I used my last wish to free the Monkeys from having to grant any more wishes.

"That was a good ride," the Scarecrow said.

"Yes, and a quick way out of our troubles," the Lion agreed. "How lucky it was you brought away that wonderful cap!"

I mean, we *were* almost done, right? In the movie, this was the part where the Wizard gave us half-assed diplomas and watches and stuff, and then fucked off in a balloon while Glinda came and told me the secret shoe password, and I got the hell back to Kansas. If this *was* a video game, though, it really felt like I'd have to use the Golden Cap two more times. Which meant there could be a *whole bunch of stuff* left to do that wasn't in the film.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DISCOVERY OF OZ, THE TERRIBLE.

We rang the bell at the front gate, and were greeted by the same Guardian Dude from—what was it, a week ago? *Two* weeks? I couldn't even keep track.

- "What! Are you back *again*?" he asked.
- "Don't act so surprised."
- "But I thought you had gone to visit the Wicked Witch of the West."
- "We did visit her," the Scarecrow said.
- "And she let you go again?"
- "She could not help it, for she is melted," the Scarecrow explained.
- "From a *bucket of water*," I added. "It was *not* that hard."
- "Good gracious!" He bowed very low, then brought us into the room with the box full of gross, sweaty sunglasses to affix to our faces. I was pretty much done with that part, though.

"I am Dorothy the Witchkiller," I said. "I melted one, and crushed the other beneath a house. My eyes cannot be blinded by even the gaudiest interior design, so I'm all set, thanks."

I never did manage to convince the others that the whole thing was just a hoax, so they all took the green shades, and I let them put a pair on Toto, too, so they wouldn't sic Munchkin PETA on my ass or whatever.

Once we entered the city proper and were on our way to the Wizard's palace, I almost regretted my decision. Without the glasses, the place didn't look any greener than your average fairy tale metropolis, but all those glittering gems made it bright as *balls*.

News spread quickly of the witch melting, and by the time we reached the palace we were surrounded by a cheering crowd. So that was kind of rad. The soldier—whose beard was actually brown with flecks of gray, incidentally—went straight to alert the Wizard to our presence, while Concierge Girl brought us to our usual parlor to wait for him.

And wait we did. Two hours later, I was about ready to sneak out and find a bath somewhere to wash the Flying Monkey off me. Finally, the soldier popped his head into the room and whispered something into Concierge Girl's ear.

"Oz the Great and Terrible needs time to prepare for you," she said. "I will show you to your rooms, and he'll be ready to receive you in the morning." She winced. "Or perhaps the next day, or the day after that."

Like hell. If I'd wanted any more days of lounging around doing nothing, I would have done it back at Winkie Castle. And as eager as I was to bathe—

Actually, the faint whiff of monkey reminded me of something. Didn't the Monkey King say one of his jobs for the Wicked Witch was to shoo Oz off her land?

"You tell that Wizard that I command the Flying Monkeys," I said, "and if there's some reason he can't see us today, he can explain it to *them*."

That seemed to do the trick, because she disappeared, and moments later we were hurried into Oz's throne room. Inside, we didn't find a big floating head, a hot girl, a giant monster *or* a ball of fire. In fact, the place was empty.

Had the Wizard just taken off? After a minute, a voice came from a hidden speaker somewhere near the top of the domed room.

"I am Oz, the Great and Terrible! Why do you seek me?"

I looked around and didn't see a curtain anywhere. There was, however, a little screen set up in one corner. "You *know* why we seek you," I said. "Why don't you come out from your hiding place so we can get this over with?"

"I am not hiding!" he said. "I am everywhere! But to the eyes of common mortals I am invisible. I will now seat myself upon my throne, that you may converse with me." Sure enough, the last line sounded like it came from the throne. The Wizard was leaning on his hidden speaker trick *hard*.

Whatever. "We killed your witch, and we're back for our rewards."

"What rewards?" he demanded.

The Scarecrow seemed almost as tired of getting dicked around as I was. "You promised to give me brains!"

"And you promised to give me a heart!" the Woodsman said.

"And you promised to give me courage!" added the Lion.

"And you promised to send me home," I said. "We will also accept hollow platitudes and incompetent balloon piloting if it finally gets this *fucking* plot moving."

There was a pause. "Is the Wicked Witch really destroyed?" Now there was definitely a tremble in the voice.

"Yup," I said. "Melted with a bucket of water."

"Oh, man," said the Voice. "Man! Well, come to me tomorrow, for I must have time to think it over."

"You've had plenty of time already," the Tin Woodsman said angrily.

"We shan't wait a day longer!" the Scarecrow agreed.

The Lion chimed in with a fierce roar, which was so loud that Toto jumped away from him in alarm and tipped over the screen in the corner. Sure enough, behind it was a frumpy little man. He wasn't, like, *Wizard of Oz* old, but maybe thirty-five or forty, with a scruffy red beard all over his face and neck, like no one had ever taught him how to shave.

"I am Oz, the Great and Terrible," he said, his voice trembling even more now. "Please don't hit me."

"Okay," I said. "What the hell?"

"Hush, my dear," he said. I decided right then and there that if he called me "my dear" one more time, I *would* punch him. "Don't speak so loud," he continued, "or you will be overheard, and I should be ruined. I'm supposed to be a Great Wizard!"

"And aren't you?" the Scarecrow asked.

"Not a bit. I'm just a common man."

"You're more than that," I said. "You're a fucking douchebag."

"Yeah, I guess I am," he said.

"But this is terrible!" said the Woodsman. "How shall I ever get my heart?"

"Or I my courage?" asked the Lion.

"Or I my brains?" wailed the Scarecrow, wiping the tears from his eyes with his coat sleeve.

"You think *you* have problems?" said Oz, "What about *me*? What about the terrible trouble I'm going to be in now that I've been found out?"

"You mean nobody else has figured out that you're a douchebag?" I asked.

"No one knows it but you four—and myself," he said. "I have fooled everyone so long that I thought I'd never be found out. I guess it was a mistake my ever letting you into the throne room. Usually I won't even see my subjects, and so they believe I'm something terrible."

He showed us a small chamber in the back of the throne room where he hid all of his tricks—the giant head was just paper mache, with obvious wires that worked the eyes and mouth. The one I saw back when we first arrived *definitely* had better special effects than this one did, but it's not like I was fooled anyway, so I didn't make a stink. He also showed us the mask and dress he had worn to appear as a beautiful woman to the Scarecrow, and when the Woodsman saw it, he actually shuddered. He clearly had a fair amount of fantasy time invested in the mysterious Lady, based solely on the Scarecrow's description.

"And the Beast was a statue, and the fireball was a bag of flaming trash, we get it," I said. "And you have speakers in the walls and chair to make your voice come from wherever."

"Oh, there are no speakers in Oz," he said. "I am a trained ventriloquist! I can throw the sound of my voice wherever I wish! Sit down, please, there are plenty of chairs. I will tell you my story."

"Ugh. Fine, but make it quick."

"I was born in the faraway land of Van Nuys, California—"

Van Nuys? "That's right by Studio City, where my Dad lives!"

"Wait. You're from the *real world*?" His face went white. "Oh my god. It's been so long."

He grabbed me by my hoodie. "Tell me the news! Did the Super Nintendo ever come out? Was Mode 7 as revolutionary as they said? And what of *Final Fantasy II*?"

He was shaking now. "Tell me, what of Final Fantasy II?"

If *Final Fantasy* was the video game I was thinking of, I was pretty sure they were up to like fifteen or twenty by now. This guy *had* been in Oz a long time. "It's so good," I said. "You should come back and play it with me. You'll love it."

He shook his head gravely. "I was just a kid," he said. "I went into a new shop in the Galleria, and they said they had the latest virtual reality technology, but when I went into the booth I blacked out, and woke up on a hot air balloon, floating over a strange and beautiful country."

His story sounded awfully familiar. "It came down gradually," he

continued, "and I was not hurt a bit. But I found myself in the midst of a strange people, who, seeing me come from the clouds, thought I was a great Wizard. Of course I let them think I was, because they were afraid of me, and promised to do anything I wished. I ordered them to build this city, and my palace, and they did it all happily."

"And when we finally showed up, you didn't figure out that you were inside the plot of *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"I never watched *The Wizard of Oz*! My sister watched it a lot, so I knew a little something about it, but it always seemed like kind of a girl thing."

He explained that he had spent decades afraid of the evil Witches from the east and west, so when I came and killed one of them, he was willing to offer me whatever I wanted to take care of the other. "But, now that you have melted her," he said, "I'm ashamed to say that I can't keep my promises."

"Because you're a *douchebag*," I said.

"No!" he insisted. "I'm a really nice guy! But I'm a very bad Wizard, I must admit."

The Scarecrow was forlorn. "Can't you give me brains?"

"You don't need them! You're learning something every day. A baby has brains, but it doesn't know much. Experience is the only thing that brings knowledge, and the longer you are on earth the more experience you get."

"That may all be true," said the Scarecrow, "but I shall be very unhappy unless you give me brains."

The Wizard looked at him carefully and scratched his beard.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "I'm not much of a magician, but if you come to me tomorrow morning, I will stuff your head with brains. I cannot tell you how to use them, however. You must find that out for yourself."

The Scarecrow was over the moon. "Oh, thank you—thank you! I'll find a way to use them, never fear!"

"But how about my courage?" the Lion asked.

"You have plenty of courage, man," answered Oz. "All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. True courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty."

"Perhaps. But can you give some of the other kind?"

"Very well, I will give you that sort of courage tomorrow," he said.

I was about ninety percent sure that by tomorrow we'd discover that the Wizard had skipped town.

"How about my heart?" the Tin Woodsman asked.

"Why, as for that," Oz said, "I think you are wrong to want a heart. It makes most people unhappy."

"That must be a matter of opinion," said the Woodsman. "For my part, I will bear all the unhappiness without a murmur, if you will give me the heart."

"Very well. Come to me tomorrow and you shall have a heart. I have played Wizard for so many years that I may as well continue the part a bit longer."

"Okay," I said. "So how are you going to get me home?"

"We shall have to think about that," he said. "Give me two or three days to consider the matter and I'll try to find a way to carry you over the desert."

"What about the balloon? Do you still have the balloon?"

"I said I need time to think! In the meantime you shall all be treated as my guests. There is only one thing I ask in return for my help, such as it is. You must keep my secret and tell no one I am a fake."

We agreed. I was fairly confident that the next part would follow the book, and he'd balloon off by himself and I'd have to somehow figure out how to use the shoes to get home. But I looked at my friends, whose faces were all filled with hope.

If he tried to ditch us without giving them each their magic feather or whatever, I was going to kick that little gremlin's ass.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAGIC ART OF THE GREAT DOUCHEBAG.

We met at breakfast the following morning, and the Scarecrow was so excited he could hardly contain himself.

"Congratulate me," he said. "For I am going to Oz to get my brains at last. When I return I shall be as other men are!"

Oh, sweetheart, I thought, looking into his painted-on, dead eyes. *It's not your brains that are the problem*. "You're fine how you are," I insisted.

"It is kind of you to like a Scarecrow," he replied. "But surely you will think more of me when you hear the splendid thoughts my new brain is going to turn out."

The Wizard was trying to pull his schtick where he made us each come visit him alone, but at this point I didn't trust him enough for that. So when the soldier came to escort the Scarecrow to the throne room, I insisted that we all accompany him. Apparently my stock had risen around here since the most recent witch murder, because he didn't try to stop us.

"Come in," Oz said when the soldier rapped on his door.

We entered and found him sitting on his throne, feet dangling, seemingly engaged in deep thought.

"I have come for my brains," the Scarecrow said, a little uneasily.

"Oh, yes. Sit down in that chair, please," the Wizard said. "You must excuse me for removing your head, but I have to do it in order to put your new brains in their proper place."

"That's all right," said the Scarecrow. "You are quite welcome to take my head off, as long as it will be a better one when you put it on again."

So the Wizard untied the Scarecrow's head and emptied out the straw. The scarecrow's face continued to move and shift expressions on the folds of the empty head sack.

Aaaagh.

Then the Wizard went to his secret closet and came back with a big scoop of what looked like oat bran, mixed in with pins and needles. He dumped it into the Scarecrow's head, and filled up the rest of the space with straw.

"Hereafter you will be a great man," he said, "for I have given you a lot of bran-new brains."

Groan. The Scarecrow, however, was straight-up *delighted*.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"I feel wise indeed," he answered earnestly. "When I get used to my brains I shall know everything!"

"Why are those needles and pins sticking out of your head?" the Woodsman asked.

"That is proof that he is sharp!" remarked the Lion.

"Well, I suppose I am next," the Woodsman said. He stepped nervously up to the Wizard. "I have come for my heart."

"Very well," Oz said. "But I shall have to cut a hole in your breast, so I can put your heart in the right place. I hope it won't hurt you."

What? "Do it through his back!" I said. The Winkie tinsmiths had spent *days* carefully reconstructing his sleek, shiny torso, and I was pretty sure this guy was going to cut right in and make a mess of him.

"Either way," the Woodsman said. "I shall not feel it at all."

So Oz picked up a pair of shears and cut a small, square hole in the Tin Woodsman's back. Then he went to a drawer and pulled out a stuffed, silk heart. It was actually sort of pretty.

"Isn't it a beauty?" he asked.

"It is, indeed!" the Woodsman said. "But is it a kind heart?"

"Oh, very," he insisted. He crammed the heart into the Woodsman's torso, and I thought I heard a muffled sound when it fell, possibly into one of his legs or something. Then the Wizard replaced the square of tin and picked up some kind of gas-powered soldering rig, sealing the hole back up.

When he was done, it actually didn't look too bad. "There," he said. "Now you have a heart that any man might be proud of. I'm sorry I had to put a patch on your back, but it really couldn't be helped."

"Never mind the patch," exclaimed the Woodsman. "I am very grateful to you, and shall never forget your kindness!"

Then the Tin Woodsman rejoined the group, holding back tears of joy. The Lion was up next, and approached the throne shaking. *Extra* cowardly.

"I have come for my courage," he said in a small voice.

"Very well," the Wizard said. "I will get it for you."

He went back to his closet and took a square bottle off the top shelf, which, unlike most of the stuff in the throne room, was actually green. Then he poured it into an intricately carved, ornate dish, and placed it at the Lion's feet. A potion to ease the Lion's anxiety? For all I knew, it really might be Klonopin. Or, you know, alcohol.

"Drink," the Wizard said.

The Lion sniffed at it, and made a face. "What is it?"

"Well," the Wizard said, "if it were inside of you, it would be courage. You know, of course, that courage is always inside one. So that this really cannot be called courage until you have swallowed it. Therefore I advise you to drink it as soon as possible."

So, *definitely* alcohol. The Wizard's speech was all the Lion needed to hear, though. He lapped up every last drop.

"How do you feel now?" asked Oz.

"Full of courage!" the Lion replied. He joined the Woodsman and Scarecrow, and the three of them congratulated each other and hugged and patted one another on the back.

"But what of Dorothy?" the Scarecrow asked when they had settled down a bit. "How will you grant her wish?"

"Why don't you guys leave us alone for a few minutes while we figure that part out," I said. "Go show off your new organs and stuff to the castle guards. I won't be too long."

I turned to the Wizard once the door had closed. "That was actually very kind of you."

"No amount of trickery can make a wise man out of a fool," he said, "Although it's easy enough to make the fool believe he is wise. You know far better than I whether or not the lot of them have had smarts, and kindness, and bravery inside them all along."

"Trust me," I said. "They'll be fine. Now, let's talk about how you're going to get me back to sunny California."

"I thought a great deal about your balloon suggestion," he said. His oldtimey speech patterns seemed to come and go—when we'd surprised him the day before he had mostly reverted to normal-person speech, but today he was talking all fancified again.

"The contraption I arrived in was destroyed long ago, but I think I may be able to construct a new one. It's high time you were returned to your home, young lady."

Hell yeah, it was.

"And high time for me, as well. For I shall be coming with you!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THE BALLOON WAS LAUNCHED.

I was okay with that. I had actually been pretty much expecting it. But something about the way he said it got under my skin. Also, I was trying not to think too much about the implications of running into another visitor from the real world in that place. Of course, it could be that whatever video game thing I was in was just multiplayer, and he was bullshitting me about having been stuck there for decades. Or it could be that I... had actually been transported to the magical land of Oz?

Whatever. I was almost out of there anyway.

The following day, I heard nothing from Oz. My friends all seemed happy and content—the Scarecrow insisted that he was having all kinds of amazing, secret thoughts in his head, and the Lion declared that he now feared nothing, and would gladly fight a hundred Kalidahs. The Woodsman, of course, discovered his new heart to be far kinder and more tender than the flesh one he used to have. They were all a little quiet and nervous around me, though—partly, I think, because they didn't want to make too big a deal about their rad gifts when they knew I hadn't received mine yet, and partly because they didn't want to see me go.

Finally, just after dinner, Oz sent the beardy soldier to fetch me and escort me to the throne room. The Wizard was sitting on his throne, with huge sheets of green silk in every shade piled up all around him.

I narrowed my eyes. "That's not a balloon."

"The balloon," he said, "will be made of silk, and coated with glue to keep the gas in. I have gathered up all the finest materials in the palace! Now all we have left to do is construct it."

"What do you mean we? You have like a million people at your

command. Order them to make the balloon."

"But surely you see I cannot!" I was starting to figure out his pattern. The more full of shit he was, the more he spoke all old-timey like the rest of the people in Oz. But when I had him flustered, he reverted to his natural speech.

For now, he was in full bluster. "The wondrous flying contraption was the very thing that convinced the people I was a wizard to begin with. If any of them discover it's something they can *make themselves*, I'll be found out!"

"So? You're leaving anyway. Why do you even care?"

"I have my legacy to think of! Also, what if the contraption *fails*? Though I'm quite certain of my design, it *is* the first balloon I've ever technically constructed."

Ugh. "Fine, what do I need to do?"

"I shall cut strips of silk into their proper shape, and you shall sew them neatly together."

"Fuck that," I said. "I'll cut and you sew."

"But I've never stitched anything in my life. I'd surely make a mess of it."

"Neither have I! What, you think women just sit around and have *sewing circles*? Come on. I know you're from the 1980s, at *least*."

"We're only wasting our time by arguing about it," Oz said. "It will take us three whole days to finish the task as it is."

What? "The hell it will. Let me get my friends in to help. They already know you're full of shit."

"I'm afraid they'll be no use. The Tin Woodman's mechanical fingers were not built for such a delicate task, and the Scarecrow's stuffed mitts couldn't even hold a needle. As for the Cowardly Lion, an animal such as he *certainly* lacks the manual dexterity."

Manual dexterity? That gave me an idea. It might not be the wisest use of my two remaining wishes, but I'd be damned if I was going to spend the following three days sewing.

I pulled the golden cap out of my basket and stood on one foot. "Ep-pe, pep-pe, kak-ke."

"What is this?" Oz looked befuddled. "Are you throwing a fit?"

"Hil-lo, hol-lo, hel-lo." I finished my hopping. "Ziz-zy, zuz-zy, zik." There was a low, rumbling sound, and the entire throne room shook. Then,

with a crash, dozens of Flying Monkeys burst through the chamber doors.

Oz screamed and scrambled behind his screen, stumbling on the way and half-sliding across the throne room floor.

"You're not welcome here!" he howled. It sounded like he was trying to do his booming Wizard voice, but it just came out like a desperate yelp. "Begone! Go back to your... wherever you go!"

The Monkey King landed on the floor and bowed. "This is the second time you have called us," he said. "What do you wish?"

"Build this balloon for me," I said. "The silk needs to be cut into the shape of that pattern over there, and then all stitched together into, like, a balloon shape. *Super* delicately."

"As you wish." They got to work, and with their little opposable monkey thumbs, turned out to be magnificent seamstresses. Between the whole troop of them, they finished the job inside of forty-five minutes. The resulting balloon was massive, more than twenty feet from top to bottom. I had them spread it out to show the Wizard, who hadn't come out from behind his screen the entire time.

"How's it look?" I asked. "Are we done?"

He risked a tiny peek. "We still have to put the glue in there," he said. "I haven't had a chance to mix it up yet! I thought it... I thought we had like three days!"

"Well, get to it," I said. He slowly made his way across the room to his secret closet, keeping his back against the wall. Meanwhile, the Flying Monkeys were getting restless without a task to keep them busy. They started chattering and fluttering around, picking emeralds out of the walls and peeling the upholstery off the throne. By the time the Wizard finished cooking his adhesive, they had pretty much trashed the place.

I was okay with that.

I ordered them to spread a thin coating inside the balloon, then hang it up on the domed ceiling to dry. I had to admit, it looked magnificent, with alternating patterns of silk, and flawless workmanship. The Wizard begrudgingly agreed, and deemed the craft skyworthy.

With another bow, the Monkey King spread his wings and flew out through the window, followed by each of his subjects in turn.

"Okay, are we set?" I asked. "Is it ready to fly?"

"It will need to sit overnight for the glue to dry," the Wizard said. "And we'll need a basket. I think the great baskets they use in the laundry room

will do nicely."

Of course he made his servants cart his dirty clothes around in baskets *big enough to ride in*.

"And then there's the matter of filling it with gas, for there is no hydrogen or helium in the kingdom of Oz."

"So, what do we use? Fairy dust? Kalidah farts?"

"Oh, there is another, quite natural way to make it float, which is to fill it with hot air. It's simple physics! When air is heated it becomes lighter than the cool air around it, and shall cause the balloon to rise." With the monkeys gone, he was becoming his old, pompous self again.

"Whatever, dude." I left him to his pontificating and went to check in with my friends, then settle in for what would hopefully, FOR THE LOVE OF MOTHERFUCKING GOD, finally be my last night in Oz.

The next morning, what looked like the entire city had gathered to watch the launch. The Wizard was already in the basket when I arrived. He had attached big, canvas fins to the sides of the balloon, connected with pulleys, apparently to give him the ability to steer it. The whole thing was strapped down to a wooden platform by a few thin ropes that seemed woefully inadequate for the task.

Oz was addressing the crowd. "Today I leave to visit my great brother Wizard who lives in the clouds," he pronounced, to thunderous applause. "While I am gone the Scarecrow will rule over you. I command you to obey him as you would me!"

The citizenry was eating it up with a spoon. "Come, Dorothy!" Oz said. "Hurry, or the balloon will fly away!"

The thing was, I wasn't sure if I wanted to. In the movie, the balloon accidentally launched without Dorothy, and she had to use her slippers to get home. But the magic slippers were the first thing I tried, back when this whole thing started. Could it be I was *supposed* to take the balloon in this version? Should I just make the goodbye speeches now, and get on with it? The Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman, and Lion were at my side, all looking terribly forlorn.

"Wait!" the Scarecrow said. "Where is Toto?"

Chasing a cat, if I remembered correctly? "He's actually the least of my worries right now."

The Wizard had his arms out, beckoning me to come aboard. "But you can't leave your dog behind," he said. "You must take him home with you!"

Must? "He loves it here. He'll be fine. Or do you mean I have to take him to finish the story? Like it's some sort of *victory condition*?"

The ropes creaked, and the balloon made a small lurch toward the sky. Now the Wizard was starting to panic. "I don't know the *rules*! Forget the dog! The ropes are breaking!"

"Wait!" None of this felt right. "I don't know if I'm supposed to go."

"You have to!" Now he was utterly freaking out. "I've been trapped here for so long—I need to find out *why*! I can't do it by myself! I never would have even gotten the idea for this stupid balloon if you hadn't brought it up!"

There was a loud crack as the cables snapped, and the balloon careened into the air. "No!" Oz shouted. "I can't bring it back down until the hot air cools on its own!" In mere moments, the balloon disappeared into the clouds, and the Wizard's cries disappeared along with it.

Which was fine, right? He goes up in the balloon, I get all upset and pout for a minute, then the Good Witch of the North shows up to teach me how to work my shoes, and *boom*, it's happily ever after. The Scarecrow, Woodsman and Lion were doing their part, orating mournfully about the injustice of it all. The assembled cityfolk were also quite upset, having realized that their Wizard was, in all likelihood, never coming back. I just closed my eyes and stood there, waiting for the Witch.

The Good Witch of the North never came.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AWAY TO THE SOUTH.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck."

That was pretty much all I had managed to get out in the entirety of the three hours we'd spent convening in the Wizard's throne room, trying to figure out what to do next.

"Don't fret, Dorothy," the Scarecrow said earnestly. "If we all put our heads together I'm sure we'll come up with something yet." I looked deep into his painted-on, burlap eyes.

"FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUK."

I'd screwed up. The Wizard had said he *never would have thought of the balloon if I hadn't mentioned it.* What if he was right? What if there was no balloon in the original Oz book, and I had accidentally given him that idea instead of whatever he was supposed to do? *Oh, shit.* I had used up a Flying Monkey wish building the thing, too. If the *real* ending required two more of those, I was *doublefucked*.

Should I throw on the hat and make the monkeys go grab the Wizard and haul him back to Earth? Where would that even *get* me? I was sure Oz would just try to get me into that fucking balloon again. If I went with him, and it *was* the wrong idea, what were the chances we'd both wind up dead somewhere in the desert? And even if the Wizard *did* have a backup plan, it would probably hinge on Flying Monkeys, and I'd have used up my last wish. No, that guy was basically useless. I was better off keeping the monkeys in my back pocket.

"We are not *so* unlucky," the Scarecrow said. He was sitting on the throne—all of the Wizard's former subjects seemed perfectly content to have him as their new king, and if they weren't going to complain about it, I certainly wasn't. "When I remember that a short time ago I was up on a pole in a farmer's cornfield, and that now I am the ruler of this beautiful

city, I am quite satisfied with my lot."

"I also am well-pleased with my new heart," the Tin Woodsman said. "And, really, that was the only thing I wished in all the world."

"For my part, I am content in knowing I am as brave as any beast that ever lived, if not braver," the Lion said modestly.

"Is there no chance that you might come to love the Emerald City as we do," the Scarecrow asked, "and that we might all be happy here together?"

I sighed. "It's not that I don't love you guys. The three of you—and the meat pies, of course—are the only part of this whole thing that's been tolerable. But I need to get home. Like, for real."

"Well, then, we all must help you do it," the Woodsman said, "but what can be done?"

We had already tried whistling for the Mouse Queen, but if she was some sort of a cheat code, she was a shitty one. She had zero ideas.

"What of this Glinda you mentioned?" the Lion asked. "The Good Witch of the North. Might she yet help us?"

"Oh, Glinda isn't the Good Witch of the North." The bearded soldier had been tidying up the throne room—he was thrilled that after twenty-five years loyal service, the new king had finally let him come inside. Now he took a break from sweeping up fallen gemstones and monkey feathers, and leaned on his broom. "The Good Witch of the North is Locasta Tattypoo."

"Are you sure? She gave me a Witch Kiss a couple of weeks ago, and I kept expecting her to show up again, but she never did."

"Kindly old woman?" the soldier asked. "Small like a Munchkin, with a jolly smile?"

"Um, yeah. That sounds like her."

"That's Locasta. I know her well, for she was always nice to me whenever she paid the Great Wizard a visit. Glinda is the Witch of the *South*. She is the most powerful of all the Witches, and rules over the Quadlings."

The Scarecrow's terrifying nightmare face lit up. "Do you think this Glinda would help Dorothy find a way home?"

"She might. Her castle stands on the edge of the desert, so she may know a way to cross it."

"And is she a Good Witch?" the Lion asked. "Not that I would be afraid to run across another Bad one, of course."

"The Quadlings think she is good. And she is kind to everyone. I have

heard that Glinda is a beautiful woman, who knows how to keep young in spite of the many years she has lived."

"Really," the Tin Woodsman said, intrigued.

Jesus Christ. "Okay," I said. "How do I get there?"

"The way is straight to the south," he answered, "but it is said to be full of dangers to travelers. There are wild beasts in the woods, and a race of odd men who do not like strangers to cross their country."

"You still have the Golden Cap!" the Scarecrow said. "You can call upon the Flying Monkeys once more, and be in Glinda's kingdom at once!"

I thought it over, and as much as I dreaded the prospect of another walking tour, I just couldn't risk it. I was already one monkey command short, and I couldn't afford to squander the last one if there was any other way forward. Also, there was the whole thing about setting them free with my last wish. Could I really look the Monkey King in the eyes and say 'Sorry about eternal servitude, dude, but I didn't feel like walking?'

"I think I'm going to have to make this trip the hard way, guys."

"Then I shall go with you," the Lion declared. "I am tired of your city and long for the woods and the country again. I am really a wild beast, you know. Besides, you will need someone to protect you."

"That is true," agreed the Woodsman. "My axe may be of service, so I also will go with you to the Land of the South."

"When shall we start?" the Scarecrow asked.

"My liege!" the soldier exclaimed. "You've only just come to rule the Emerald City. Surely we can't spare you so soon!"

"If it wasn't for Dorothy I should never have had the brains that make me fit to rule," he said. "She lifted me from the pole in the cornfield and brought me to the Emerald City to begin with. So my good luck is all due to her, and I shall never leave her until she starts back to Kansas for good."

It hadn't actually occurred to me that, if we were running off script, the others might have better things to do than go traipsing across the countryside with me. But I was certainly happy to have them along. "Alrighty. Let's do this."

"We shall go tomorrow morning," the Scarecrow said. "Let us all get ready, for it will be a long, *long* journey."

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuk.

CHAPTER XIX.

ATTACKED BY THE FIGHTING TREES.

The next morning, Concierge Girl brought my freshly-laundered clothes, then just stood kind of awkwardly by the door. It would be my last night in the Emerald City—was I expected to *tip* her? Did they even *have* money in Oz? She was kind of sticking one cheek out a little, like she was expecting a *kiss* or something?

I gave her a meat pie. She looked at it like it was a dead rat, then thanked me profusely and left.

We swung by the front gates to drop off the sunglasses that my companions still had bolted over their eyes, and this time the Guardian seemed absolutely heartbroken to see us go.

"You are now our ruler," he said to the Scarecrow. "You must come back to us as soon as possible!"

"I certainly shall if I am able," the Scarecrow replied. "But I must help Dorothy to get home, first."

It was all very charming, but the truth was, I had other things weighing on my mind. We headed due south—there was technically a road going in our general direction, but the countryside was pleasant enough, and by now we had gotten used to off-roading it. The sun was shining, the air was so fresh you could almost taste it, and Toto ran around us in circles, chasing moths and butterflies, barking merrily all the time.

I had settled into a bit of a funk.

After a few minutes we turned to take a last look at the Emerald City, a mass of towers and steeples and that big-ass dome of the Wizard's palace rising up above the city walls. At least it all looked green from the outside.

"Oz was not such a bad Wizard, after all," the Woodsman said, tapping

his tin chest.

"He knew how to give me brains, and very good brains, too," the Scarecrow said.

"If Oz had taken a dose of the same courage he gave me," the Lion added, "he would have been a brave man."

I left it alone. As far as I was concerned, that guy was a fucking *dick*. He had been dropped into this land just like I had, but instead of spending any effort to get home, or even treating the people he met with basic human decency, he *pretended to be a god*, made them build a city for him, and then hid in his throne room for *literally decades* so they wouldn't find out he was a fraud. Fuck that guy.

If I was being honest, though, it wasn't the futhermucking Wizard that was bothering me. I'd had a restless night, and while I'd lain awake staring at hideous, ornate wainscoting, I was pretty sure I'd figured out what was really going on. I had made it to the end of the story, but the story hadn't ended. And it wasn't because I was playing a video game and I hadn't done the puzzles right. When that happens in a game, you just lose, and either quit or start over. You're not *trapped there forever*. No one would *ever* design a game like that.

No, the reason my stay in Oz hadn't ended after I'd killed the Wicked Witch was because in the real world I was laying in a hospital bed somewhere, and *my head wound was too severe to recover from the coma*.

It made more sense than any of my other theories. There was *no way* virtual reality technology had advanced enough that it encompassed all five of your senses and was utterly indistinguishable from the real world. And KGB brainwashing? *Come on*. At first I had discounted the idea that I was in a dream, because I'm pretty sure that, if anything, my subconscious would have gone with the Judy Garland version. But if I was stuck in a coma, you know what my loved ones would probably do while they waited tearfully by my side, hoping against hope that I'd recover?

Fucking read to me.

And although L. Frank Baum wasn't the sort of thing my Mom would choose, it was *totally* up Madeline's alley. She had received an off-brand Kindle knockoff for her birthday one year, and stuffed it full of free public domain shit. Plus, she was always trying to get me to read more. And my Mom would think it was all heartwarming and adorable, too—my Mom *loved* Madeline—so she'd just sit there and let her read whatever. My

broken head was constructing a reality from this continuous audio input, but when it got to the part where it was supposed to wake up, it couldn't. And it might *never* be able to. The plot was over, but the story just *kept going*.

We walked all day, through gorgeous, boring farmland, and *nothing fucking happened*.

That night, asleep on the soft, long grass with nothing but the stars over me, I dreamed. I dreamed that I was back at the mall, browsing through shitty band t-shirts at Spencer's with Glinda the Good Witch from the movie and Madeline, who had such a big crush on Glinda that she could barely speak. But I *knew* it was a dream.

So I tried a trick I had been using to wake up from nightmares ever since I was a little girl. I had always loved my occasional flying dreams, and every once in a while I had a scary falling one. But at some point I picked up on the fact that in my dreams I never actually *landed*. I climbed up on a mall bench and jumped off. Sure enough, before I hit tile, I found myself awake, lying in a field with the Scarecrow staring down at me creepily, as per usual.

My sudden waking must have startled him. "Dorothy? Are you feeling well?"

"Shut up. I need to try something." The Lion was snoring away on his belly beside me, so I carefully climbed up on his back, planted my bare feet in his mane, and jumped.

I hit the ground hard, scraping the bottom of my foot on a rock. *Stupid*. If I was trapped in a coma, *of course* I wouldn't be able to just snap myself out of it willingly.

The thing was, once I *knew* I was in a dream, I could usually control what happened in it. But this... it definitely wasn't the real world, but it didn't exactly follow dream logic, either. Were the rules *different* for coma dreams? Compared to the hazy mall scene I had just woken from—the details of which were already dissipating in my head like cotton candy—this felt *utterly* real. My foot was throbbing at that very moment, and after I rubbed it to inspect the damage, and lifted my fingers to my lips, I could *taste the blood*.

It was completely unlike any dream I'd ever had, coma or otherwise. I mean, if Oz wasn't a real place, it was certainly indistinguishable from one. And as much as I had idly speculated about hallucinogenic drugs, people who were actually tripping could *tell* that their senses were wacked out.

This wasn't like that at all.

There was a word for people who weren't able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. But I wasn't ready to start exploring *that* theory yet.

Needless to say, I didn't sleep much for the rest of the night. When morning came, I poked a little at my breakfast, and we resumed our journey south. My friends could see that something was wrong, but I laughed off their inquiries and claimed that I was only tired. Still, ever since we had left the Emerald City, I had been distant, and I'm sure they felt it acutely. My Mom always said I should go into construction, I was so good at putting up

Walls? We crested a small hill and found ourselves staring at an impenetrably thick forest, cutting across the fields like a sheer cliff, extending to the east and west as far as the eye could see. *Oh*, *shit*. It was like my subconscious mind felt threatened by all my random questioning and introspection, and was shoving literal barriers up through cracks I had bored into my psyche.

"What shall we do now?" the Lion asked.

"The Flying Monkeys could carry us over these woods quite easily," the Woodsman said.

"No Flying Monkeys," I said. "Not yet." I hadn't walked for a goddamned day and a half so that I could waste my last monkey wish on a *forest*. We walked through forests *all the time*. Besides, if it was my stupid brain making these woods, I should be able to make a pathway through it, right?

I closed my eyes and concentrated. *Make a pathway, make a pathway, make a pathway.*

"Hey," the Scarecrow called out. "I found a pathway!"

Crap. I had kind of been hoping that wouldn't work.

"There's a big tree with such wide-spreading branches that there's room to pass beneath," he said. "Right here! Follow me and I'll—AAAAAAAAAAH!"

Just as he came under the first branches, they reached down, twisted around his limbs, picked him up and flung him over our heads into the field behind us. The Scarecrow wasn't injured, of course, but did have a bit of the stuffing knocked out of him.

Oh, that's how you want to play this, subconscious?

"There's another space between the trees over here," the Lion said.

"Let me try again," the Scarecrow said. "Perhaps this time I'll—AAAAAAAAAH!" The branches immediately seized him and tossed him back out again.

The Scarecrow picked himself up and smoothed out a few lumps. "Surely a third attempt won't—"

"Whoa, whoa," I said. "Let's try a different strategy." I stepped up to the treeline, just out of the reach of any wooden limbs.

"Trees?" I shouted into the forest (and, you know, whatever else needed shouting into). "Trees are your big play here? We LITERALLY brought a TREE-CUTTING MACHINE. Woodsman! How many trees have you chopped down since I've met you?"

The Tin Woodsman planted his feet beside me and put his hands on his hips. "One hundred and seven," he said.

"One hundred and—wait, *what*?" I was going to say, like, *six*. Was the guy chopping trees down all night, every night, just out of *spite*? Well, whatever. "What I'm trying to say is, DO NOT FUCK with this guy."

The Woodsman lifted his axe and approached the treeline slowly, and when a big branch grabbed at him, he cut it in two with a single swing. The entire tree shook, as if in pain.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Be quick!" We rushed under the tree without a scratch, except for Toto, who yelped as he was caught by a small branch. But the Woodsman quickly put his axe through it and set the little dog free.

After that, the trees left us alone. Either it was just the outer row that was enchanted to keep out intruders, or we had scared this forest *shitless*. Either way, we were able to travel through the woods without trouble. It was dark in there, and the foliage looked ugly and twisted.

Subtle. If the symbolism of bringing my friends through the barriers of my subconscious mind was supposed to bring us closer together, though, it wasn't working. If anything, I was feeling even more alone. Because if all of this was a figment of my imagination, that included the three of them. How do you have a heart-to-heart with someone you suspect you may have made up? Like, if the Scarecrow asked me if something was wrong, was that just part of my brain trying to psychoanalyze? Or was he the part of me that knew I hated people asking me if something was wrong, throwing up a red flag?

Or was he the coma, trying to distract me from the fact that I was in a fucking coma?

I was starting to freak myself out. I have no idea how long we walked—it could have been minutes or hours. I was completely lost in my thoughts, few of which made logical sense. Was I *supposed* to bring the others with me into this forest? Should I be here *alone*? Should I be here *at all*?

Suddenly we came to the edge of the woods, only to find a high, white wall as bright and smooth as porcelain. Again, it stretched as far as the eye could see.

"I cannot think why this wall is here," the Scarecrow said, befuddled. "Nor what country it conceals."

I just stared at it, my eyes wide. "The wall is my sanity," I said. "Beyond it lies *madness*."

CHAPTER XX.

THE DAINTY CHINA COUNTRY.

The Tin Woodsman suggested that we have the Flying Monkeys carry us over the wall, but I shot him a dirty look, so he started chopping up branches to make a ladder. Were the trees he cut them from *sentient* trees? Did it even *matter* at this point? EVERYTHING in this fucking place moved and talked and had feelings. I mean, what was the *Lion* killing for his dinner every night? What were my *meat pies* made out of?

Aaaaaaaaaaaah.

"Rest your brains and do not worry about the wall," the Woodsman said. "When we have climbed over it, we shall know what is on the other side."

I assumed that the other side would just be a featureless void, or possibly a starry expanse with *Twilight Zone* clocks and shit floating around in it. Oz wasn't some fever dream. The whole hit-your-head-and-imagine-a-fantastic-adventure thing was a stupid television trope. And I hadn't passed out in some shitty mall store during an earthquake. *There never was a mall store*. I was now convinced that the real me was locked up in an institution somewhere, drooling onto a padded floor.

The real me was out of her goddamned mind.

When the Woodsman's ladder was finished, it looked in all honesty like a rickety piece of crap. He assured me that it was sturdy, though. There was nothing left to do but climb it.

So we did. And what wound up being on the other side of the big, porcelain wall was a whole porcelain town, with houses and buildings that barely reached past my knees. And little porcelain princes and princesses and shepherds and milkmaids and livestock and what have you. There was a terrifying porcelain clown.

Huh. They were all walking around and having conversations and stuff, because *of course they were*. None of them seemed to notice the assorted

flesh, tin and straw giants who had appeared at the top of their wall, except for a porcelain dog with an oversized head, who made a tiny bark and then ran away.

The ladder was too heavy to pull up after us, so we tossed the Scarecrow down first and used him to break our fall. Even so, landing on the porcelain floor made the pain in my foot flare up again. If Oz was just a product of my insanity, recognizing it didn't seem to make anything hurt less.

We continued south, and the first thing we came across was a porcelain milkmaid milking a porcelain cow. It reminded of an actual porcelain horse that my Mom kept over the fireplace at home. Some old person from work had given it to her (old people *always* had whole shelves full of porcelain crap). Anyway, my Mom insisted that she only liked the horse *ironically*.

When the cow looked up and saw us, it suddenly gave a moo and kicked over the stool, the pail, and even the milkmaid herself. They all fell on the ground with a clatter.

"See what you have done!" the milkmaid cried. She sounded more angry than afraid. "My cow has broken her leg, and I must take her to the mender's shop and have it glued on again. What do you mean by coming here and frightening my cow?"

Sure enough, one of the cow's legs had broken clean off. "Um, sorry," I said.

She was too pissed off to even answer. She picked up the leg and led her cow away, the poor animal limping on three legs. She kept glancing over her shoulder and giving us the stink eye as she walked.

"We must be very careful here," said the Woodsman, "or we may hurt these pretty little people so they will never get over it."

A bit farther on, we came across a porcelain princess in a fancy dress. As soon as she spotted us, she bolted.

"Don't chase me! Don't chase me!" she screamed.

"Relax! We're not going to chase you!"

She finally stopped once she decided she was a safe distance away. "You see, if I run I may fall down and break myself."

"So don't run," I said. "And isn't there some kind of mender person? Can't you just go get fixed up?"

"Oh, yes," the princess said. "But one is never so pretty after being mended, you know."

Fair enough.

"See, there is Mr. Joker, one of our clowns," she continued. "He is always trying to stand upon his head. He has broken himself so often that he is mended in a hundred places, and doesn't look at all pretty."

The clown was the fucking *worst*. He was cracked all over, sure, but he also pranced around with big, exaggerated mime gestures, and kept trying to talk to us in rhyme.

"Don't mind Mr. Joker," the princess said. "He is considerably cracked in his head, and that makes him foolish."

I didn't actually care that much if the clown was an asshole. I just wanted to know if any of this was *real*. I got down on my knees to inspect the pint-sized princess up close. She certainly *looked* real. I stopped short of touching her, though. "What do you think? Do you want to come back to Calabasas with me and live above a fireplace with a porcelain horse?"

"That would make me very unhappy," she said. "You see, here in our country we live contentedly, and can talk and move around as we please. But whenever any of us are taken away our joints at once stiffen, and we can only stand straight and look pretty. Of course that is all that is expected of us when we are on mantels and cabinets and drawing-room tables, but our lives are much pleasanter here in our own country."

Again with the sentient-mannequin-trapped-forever schtick—it was like a *theme* in this thing. Did that actually lend credence to the coma theory? Like, *I* was the paralyzed one, and my mind was trapped? I might have been overthinking it. We kept walking cautiously over porcelain farmland, and after an hour or so, came to another wall.

Was that *it*? Okay, that *had* to be me going crazy, right? Who would put that scene in a *book*? Nothing happened in it. What would the point even be? "Don't be mean to old people, because... *their knick-knacks are alive*?" Or DO be mean to them, because they're *fucking monsters who lure sentient porcelain creatures to their doom*?

The second wall wasn't as high as the first, and we were able to get over it by climbing on the Lion's back. Once we were on top of it, the Lion gathered his legs under him to jump over, but accidentally swiped a little porcelain church with his tail and smashed it to pieces.

Still, we had managed to get through the whole, fragile town and only broke one church and a cow leg, which I thought was pretty good. Also, I still seemed to be, like, *a person*, and my friends were still with me, which

was comforting. So I hadn't completely descended into madness and despair yet.

That had to be a good sign.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LION BECOMES THE KING OF BEASTS.

On the other side of the wall, the terrain was boggy and marshy, and smelled like ass. It was difficult to get through without stepping into muddy holes, but we persevered. Eventually we came to solid ground, and walked through the underbrush into *another fucking forest*.

The trees here were taller and older than any we'd seen yet. "This forest is perfectly delightful," declared the Lion. "Never have I seen a more beautiful place."

"It seems gloomy to me," the Scarecrow said.

"Not a bit," the Lion answered. "I should like to live here all my life. See how soft the dried leaves are under your feet, and how rich and green the moss is that clings to these old trees? Surely no wild beast could wish a pleasanter home."

If that were true, no one had told the other wild beasts about it. We didn't encounter a single one for the rest of the day. When it became too dark to go any farther, Toto and I snuggled up against the Lion's hide to sleep, with the Woodsman and Scarecrow keeping watch as usual.

I was exhausted. At least the day's long trek had pushed some of the dark thoughts out of my mind. I had really started to lose my shit back in forest number one that morning, but the whole thing with the porcelain village was so weird and dumb that it actually kind of shook me out of my funk. And the more I thought about it, the more I decided that if Coma Patient Theater was a shitty trope, Mentally Ill Person Who Has Magical Adventures in Her Mind was an even shittier one. Schizophrenia was a very real, very tragic condition that a lot of people struggled with, but I was pretty sure it didn't manifest itself as a *Wizard of Oz* fantasy that looked and

sounded and smelled like you were actually living it.

Which left me... well, I wasn't sure *where* it left me. But my feet were sore, I had kind of a dull ache all over my body, and my current plan was to fall asleep cuddling this lion and worry about it in the morning.

When morning came, I still had nothing. So we kept walking south. We'd eventually have to get to Glinda the Good Witch, or at least *something*. Right? Before long we heard a low rumbling of growling and snorting, and we discovered what had happened to all the animals in this forest.

They had all assembled for a *big ancient forest animal meeting*. There were tigers and elephants and bears and wolves and foxes and all kinds of stuff, some of which belonged in a forest and some of which didn't. They were all sort of snarling at each other—I guess when animals spoke among themselves they didn't bother with English?

Several of the beasts caught sight of the Cowardly Lion, and at once the great assemblage hushed as if by magic. The biggest of the tigers came up to the Lion and bowed.

"Welcome, o King of Beasts," he said. "You have come in good time to fight our enemy and bring peace to all the animals of the forest once more."

Okay, this should be good. "What is your trouble?" the Lion asked. His tone was *statesmanlike*.

"We are all threatened by a fierce enemy which has lately come into this forest," the tiger said. "It is a most tremendous monster, like a great spider, with a body as big as an elephant and eight legs as long as a tree trunk. As the monster crawls through the forest he seizes an animal with one of his legs and drags it to his mouth, where he eats it as a spider does a fly. Not one of us is safe while this fierce creature is alive, and we had called a meeting to decide how to take care of ourselves when you came among us."

The Tin Woodsman's face lit up. "The Flying Monkeys!" he said. "Surely an army of them could conquer this horrible beast."

Here was the thing about the Flying Monkeys. I had told myself that I would need my last wish to win some video game I was playing, and as long as I hung onto it, some tiny part of me could *still believe that was true*. Or, even if I was trapped here by a head injury or undiagnosed psychosis or whatever, playing by the rules I had imposed upon myself meant that I was *trying* to get through it, the only way I knew how. Using up my last *deus ex monkeyna* would feel like I was giving up, and somehow *surrendering to*

Fortunately, the Lion saved me from having to make that decision. "No," he said. "This is *my* battle." He addressed the tiger. "If I put an end to your enemy, will you bow down to me and obey me as King of the Forest?"

"We will do that gladly," the tiger said. And all the other beasts roared mightily:

"We will!"

"Where is this great spider of yours now?"

"Yonder, among the oak trees," the tiger said, pointing with his paw.

"Take good care of these friends of mine," the Lion said, "and I will go at once to fight the monster."

"Hold up," I said. "I'm coming with."

The Lion protested, whispering to me that if he didn't go alone, the other animals might not accept him as their lord and ruler. But I convinced him that they couldn't possibly dock him points for bringing along a tenyear-old girl. If anything, it was *more* impressive that he could dispatch a horrible beast while having to worry about keeping me safe while he did it. The fact was, I was desperate to find some whiff of plot that would give me the slightest hope that I was still voyaging through literature, and I could just get to the end of the book and go home. It was a long shot, sure, but the giant spider was the closest thing to actual story structure we'd come across since leaving the Emerald City, and I wasn't about to sit around waiting to hear how it turned out.

We crept through the forest as quietly as possible, and when we found the beast, it was as huge as the tiger claimed, and twice as ugly—legs like telephone poles, teeth a foot long, and all covered in coarse, black hair. If anything represented all my dark thoughts, or head wound or mental illness or *whatever*, it was this monstrosity.

And it was asleep.

The Lion put one claw up to his mouth in a silent *shush*, then quietly padded up to the spot where the beast's head was joined to its massive body with a neck as narrow as a wasp's waist. (I was fairly certain that whoever came up with this thing had never seen a close-up picture of actual spider anatomy, but that was neither here nor there.) He popped all five claws, raised his paw, and with one great blow cut the spider's head right off its body. The headless, elephantine spider thrashed about for a minute, then finally curled its legs up under its torso and lay still.

And that was it. We made our way back to the clearing where all the beasts of the forest were waiting for us to return. The Lion just gazed upon them regally and smiled.

"You're welcome," he said.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE COUNTRY OF THE QUADLINGS.

The Lion promised to come back and rule over the animals as soon as I was safely on my way to Kansas. So now I had *two* kings slumming it with me (although I suppose the Scarecrow was technically a mayor). We passed through the forest safely, and when we stepped out of its gloom we found ourselves at the bottom of a steep, rocky hill.

"That will be a hard climb," the Scarecrow said. "But we must get over the hill, nevertheless."

So we started climbing. We had barely made it to the first rock, however, when a rough voice called out from behind it.

"Keep back!" A head peeked over the rock. "This hill belongs to us, and we don't allow anyone to cross it."

"Oh, we're crossing it," I said. I had been a bit out of sorts since watching the Lion kill the giant spider. Part of me suspected that the incident put a cap on the "Oz as a metaphor for my troubled mental state" portion of the journey, or possibly even disproved the entire theory of it. But I was tired of trying to figure out what all of this was supposed to be on an existential level. And at that point I had approximately zero patience for weird-looking dudes behind rocks telling me where I could and couldn't go.

"But you shall not!" the man insisted, stepping out from behind his outcropping. And "weird-looking" didn't even begin to describe him.

He was short and stout and had a big, flat head supported by a thick, wrinkly neck. He also had no arms at all. Was this a Quadling? No, I seemed to remember Beard Soldier saying something about odd people who prevented travelers from crossing their land. This guy seemed to fit the bill.

The Scarecrow, apparently, decided that he didn't look like much of a

threat. "I'm sorry not to do as you wish," he said, "but we must pass over your hill whether you like it or not." He took one step forward, and as quick as lightning the man's head shot forward and his neck stretched out, hitting the Scarecrow like a battering ram and sending him tumbling back down the hill.

The Hammer Head guy just chuckled, and a chorus of boisterous laughter came from behind the other rocks. Hundreds of the armless little shits popped their heads up, all over the hillside.

The Lion roared and charged, but another head shot out, and he went rolling down the hill as if he'd been hit by a cannonball. The Tin Woodsman lifted his axe and tried to look threatening, but was hit in the gut by a head rocket before he could even take his first step, and went tumbling after.

Fuck *that*. I turned around and made my way slowly down the hill to join them.

We tried to find a pathway around the hill, but we were surrounded by rocks to the left and the right, and each one hid a sneering Hammer Head waiting to thwart our progress. There was no road open to us, except to the north, back into the forest.

"Perhaps it's time to call upon the Winged Monkeys," the Tin Woodsman suggested. "You have still the right to command them once more."

Ugh. Was this the challenge I had been saving my final monkey wish for the entire time? Or was this the challenge I needed my *second* monkey wish for, the one I'd wasted on balloon sewing, and I still had another impossible task left to undertake? To make it all worse, I was acutely aware that if I used the monkeys to get to Glinda now, I could have just as well called them back in the Emerald City and saved myself two days' worth of fucking hassle.

Of course, none of that was what I was *really* worried about. Would calling the monkeys mean I was *giving up*? Was it a signal to the book, or the coma, or the universe or whatever that I didn't have the strength left to go on, or the wits left to figure this out, so *fuck it, leave me stranded in Oz forever*?

I was starting to freak myself out again, so I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Forget about all the stupid theories. Forget about the book, the video game, the brainwashing, the coma, the madness. Forget it all.

You've been transported to the magical land of Oz. You saw the Wizard, killed the Wicked Witch, missed your balloon ride, and Glinda is your last chance to get back home. Now you're stuck at the bottom of this hill. What do you do?

You call the stupid Flying Monkeys.

I put on the cap, did the chant and the dance, and the sky immediately went dark with the silhouettes of winged primates. In a few moments the entire band stood before me.

"What are your commands?" inquired the King of the Monkeys, bowing low.

"You know," I said, "I had hoped to use my final wish to set you free."

"I knew as much the moment I looked into your eyes," he said. "All you must do to make it so is to command us never to obey the wearer of the Golden Cap again. Then we shall be free forever."

"Can I make, like, a deal with you? I set you free, and you promise to take me where I need to go, just as a favor?"

"It would behoove me to agree," the King said, "but Gayelette's spell forbade us to ever lie to the Cap's owner. Without the binding magic, the Winged Monkeys take orders from no one. We would just as soon leave you here to rot, and be on our way."

Nice. "Therefore, you must decide what you value more highly," he continued. "Our freedom, or your own desire."

I looked him straight in the eyes. "Carry me and my friends to Glinda the Good Witch."

You know what? Fuck that guy and his guilt trip. I had offered him what I thought was a square deal, but he decided he needed to be shitty about it. I wasn't the one who put the spell on them in the first place. And by my math, they had been commanded to do exactly *six things* in however many decades it had been since they were enchanted, and *four* of those were just in the last week. And they *weren't* particularly difficult.

The Winged Monkeys took the four of us, plus Toto, into their arms and flew us into the sky. It pissed off the Hammer Heads like crazy too—they yelled at us as we flew over, and shot their heads high into the air, hoping to knock us out of the monkeys' grasp. We flew over the hill, and into a country of lush fields, well-paved roads, and rippling brooks with strong, stone bridges across them. Everything was painted bright red, because *of course* they all color-coordinated. This *must* be land of the Quadlings.

They set us down at the gates of a big, handsome red castle. "This is the last time you can summon us," the Monkey King said. "So goodbye and good luck to you."

"Goodbye," I said. The monkeys rose into the air and flapped off toward the horizon. "And don't let the clouds hit you in the ass on the way out."

CHAPTER XXIII.

GLINDA THE GOOD WITCH GRANTS ARABELLA'S WISH.

The gates to Glinda's castle were guarded by three young women, dressed in sharp red uniforms trimmed with gold braids. The largest of the three approached us.

"Why have you come to the South Country?" she asked. She was polite, but something in her expression said that she was perfectly willing—and maybe just a little bit *eager*—to punch me in the face if I gave an answer she didn't like.

"We're here to see Glinda the Good Witch," I said. I had a full-grown lion and Conan the Fucking Axe Ninja at my side—I wasn't about to let this woman intimidate me.

She screwed up her face, like she was trying to decide if my response was punch-worthy. "Let me have your name, and I will ask Glinda if she will receive you," she said at last. She left through the gates, and the other two guards looked relieved. I had the distinct impression that we had just barely avoided fisticuffs.

After a few moments the guard returned to say that we were to be admitted at once. Along the way, she brought us to a changing room where we washed our faces and smoothed out our lumpy straw, and endeavored to make ourselves more or less presentable. The Woodsman oiled all his joints and pulled a bottle of tin polish from somewhere, buffing every inch of himself to a gleam. The Woodsman was *really* invested in making a good impression on Glinda the Good Witch.

When he finally finished, we followed the guard into a big room where Glinda was waiting for us on a throne of rubies.

Glinda was *crazy hot*, you guys. She wore a gauzy, white dress, and her

red hair was done in flowing ringlets that cascaded over her soft, bare shoulders. She had deep blue eyes that I was already lost in, and *perfect fucking* skin. I wasn't gay or anything, but I was a *little bit* gay for Glinda the Good Witch.

The Tin Woodsman's hinged jaw literally dropped.

"What can I do for you, my child?" the Witch asked.

The prickly exterior I always worked so hard to maintain shattered under her gaze. "I screwed it all up," I said, trying to hold back the tears. "The stupid Wizard flew away without me, and we've just been wandering through forests and creepy doll countries—the Lion killed a giant spider, but even that was anticlimactic—and I don't know if I'm in a game or a coma or brainwashed or crazy, but this can't possibly be what happens in the book. And I'm tired, and filthy, and I stink, and used up all my monkey wishes, and I don't want to be trapped here forever." I fell to my knees, which was fine, because I guess I was pretty much begging at that point.

Glinda stepped off her throne, drew me close, and whispered into my ear. "Take heart, my sweet child. This is *exactly* what happens in the book."

And for some reason, *that* was what I needed to hear. Everything would be fine—I was still just voyaging through literature. The one theory I hadn't actually considered was that L. Frank Baum was just a shitty writer—he got to his big, dramatic conclusion but *hadn't met his word goal yet*, so he had Dorothy wander the countryside for forty more pages, encountering all the half-baked shit that he hadn't managed to work into the plot.

It was a *revelation*. "So is that *it*?" I was almost afraid to ask. "Do I get to go *home*?"

Glinda gave me a little kiss on the forehead. "Bless your dear heart," she said. "I am sure I can tell you of a way to get back to Kansas. But, if I do, you must give me the Golden Cap."

"Certainly!" the Scarecrow exclaimed. "It is no use to us now, and when you have it you can command the Winged Monkeys three times!"

That's when it hit me. I could have just used up my three wishes, then *given the cap to the Scarecrow*, who could have used *his* three wishes and given the cap to the Tin Woodsman. I had been fretting over my precious monkey resources for days, but I could have had six additional wishes at least—*nine* if the Lion could manage to successfully navigate the hopping parts of the spell while balanced on his hind legs.

This is why I suck at computer games—Madeline would have made a

much better Dorothy than I did. I handed the stupid hat to the Good Witch.

"I think I shall need their service just those three times," she said, smiling. "And you, gentle Scarecrow. What will you do when Dorothy has left us?"

"I will return to the Emerald City," he said. "For Oz has made me its ruler and the people like me. The only thing that worries me is how to cross the hill of the Hammer Heads."

"Then by means of the Golden Cap I shall command the Winged Monkeys to carry you to the gates of the Emerald City," Glinda said. "For it would be a shame to deprive the people of so wonderful a ruler."

The Scarecrow was absolutely giddy at the compliment. "Am I really wonderful?" he asked.

"You are... *unusual*," she replied. Oh my god, I *loved* Glinda the Good Witch. She turned to the Tin Woodsman. "And what will become of you when Dorothy leaves this country?"

Up to this point he had remained silent, apparently struck dumb by the Witch's beauty. Now he leaned on his axe for a moment, thinking. I was genuinely worried that he was going to hit on her.

Finally, he spoke. "The Winkies were very kind to me, and asked me to rule over them as their king when the Wicked Witch was no more. I am fond of the Winkies, and if I could get back again to the Country of the West, I should like nothing better than to rule over them forever."

"Wait," I said. "What? When did the Winkies ask you to be their king?"

"After they repaired me, just as I woke up," he said matter-of-factly. "They had never seen a man such as myself, and were quite taken aback in wonder."

So he had an offer of royalty *weeks ago*, and never even bothered to mention it, even as the others were being handed their own kingships left and right. The thought of it made me smile. The truth was, my Tin Man crush had mellowed a bit. I mean, I still thought he was hot like burning, and those hips would hold a special place in my sex dreams for years to come. But I had come to accept that in his eyes I'd always be a little girl—and not in the "he refuses to acknowledge the woman I've become" sense. When he looked at me he *literally saw a ten-year-old child*. No part of that scenario was a turn-on for me.

"Indeed, there has never *been* a man such as yourself," Glinda said. "My second command to the Winged Monkeys will be that they carry you

safely to the land of the Winkies. Your brains may not be so large to look at as those of the Scarecrow, but you are really brighter than he is—when you are well-polished—and I am sure you will rule the Winkies wisely and well."

Then the Witch looked at the big, shaggy Lion and asked, "When Dorothy has returned to her own home, what will become of you?"

"Over the hill of the Hammer Heads," he said, "lies a grand old forest, and all the beasts that live there have made me their King. If I could only get back to this forest, I would pass my life very happily there."

"My third command to the Winged Monkeys," Glinda said, "shall be to carry you to your forest. Then, having used up the powers of the Golden Cap, I shall give it to the King of the Monkeys, that he and his band may thereafter be free forevermore."

Again, I felt like a dumbass. Evidently I had watched *Aladdin* too many times when I was a kid, because I had been all caught up in the whole idea of using my final wish to free the Genie. I could have just used my third monkey wish and then *given them the hat*, and it would have accomplished the same thing.

The Scarecrow and Woodsman and Lion all thanked Glinda earnestly for her generosity. "You are truly as kind as you are hot," I said. "But what about me? How do I get home?"

"Your silver shoes will carry you over the desert," Glinda replied. "If you had known their power you could have gone home the very first day you came to this country."

"I did know their power! I tried to use them the first day I came here!"

"But then I should not have had my wonderful brains!" the Scarecrow said. "I might have passed my whole life in the farmer's cornfield."

"And I should not have had my lovely heart," the Tin Woodsman added. "I might have stood and rusted in the forest 'til the end of the world."

"And I should have lived a coward forever," declared the Lion. "And no beast in all the forest would have had a good word to say to me."

"That's true," I said. "And I'm thrilled to death that I got to meet you all, and help you get your hearts' desire, plus a whole kingdom or whatever. But *for real*, I need to go home."

"The silver shoes have wonderful powers," the Good Witch said. "And one of the most curious things about them is that they can carry you to any place in the world in three steps, and each step will be made in the wink of

an eye. All you have to do is to knock the heels together three times and command the shoes to carry you wherever you wish to go."

"So instead of passively stating how much I *like* Calabasas," I said, "I just needed to straight-up tell the shoes to *take me* there?" I was incredulous. "That's the *same thing*. That's the fucking *worst*."

Nevertheless, it was true. And now there was nothing left except the tearful goodbyes.

I took the Scarecrow's gloved hands in my own, foregoing the hug, since now in addition to his creepy face, he also had *pins and needles* poking out through his burlap head. "You've been a loyal companion and a kind, true friend," I said. "And there is *absolutely* no doubt in my mind that I will miss you least of all."

"That's fair," the Scarecrow said.

"I'm *kidding*," I said, giving him a careful hug in spite of it all. "I can't even count the times your cleverness saved us, and I'm glad you finally figured out how smart you are."

I turned and buried my head in the Lion's mane. "No one could ask for better protector, or a braver friend," I said. "Before the Klonopin, or after."

That just left the Tin Woodsman. And with all the tears flowing down his face, he was going to need about a gallon of oil. I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. "Is there any chance you're patterned after some farmhand or something, out in the Midwest? With, I don't know, a prosthetic hip replacement?"

"Oh, Dorothy," the Woodsman said. "I didn't understand a *word* of that. How shall I ever get by without you?"

I disengaged from his embrace. "Well, you have a whole country to rule now, so... *representative democracy*? Seriously, all of you. Think about it."

I picked Toto up and tucked him under my arm. I was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to stay in Oz, and if I somehow ended up *owning a dog* after this was all over, I was okay with it. He was actually a pretty great little dog. Then I closed my eyes and clicked my heels together three times.

"Take me home," I said. Short, simple, and sweet.

Instantly I was whirling through the air, and all I could hear was the wind whistling past my ears.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOME AGAIN.

The silver shoes took three wild, lurching steps through the void, then stopped so suddenly that I tumbled onto the grass and rolled over several times before I even figured out where I was.

Grass? There was no grass at *the mall*.

I opened my eyes to see a great, windswept plain under a vast, cloudless gray sky. There was a wooden farmhouse plopped down right in the middle of it that looked brand new and even a bit unfinished—which would make sense if the last one had recently been swept up in a tornado.

I was in fucking *Kansas*.

An old man was milking cows out in the barn, and Toto took off toward him, running. I didn't even remember what Dorothy's uncle's name was, but maybe Toto was technically *his* dog? A stout, silver-haired woman came out of the house with a watering pot, then dropped it when she saw me.

"My darling child!" she cried, tackling me in a running hug and covering my face with kisses. "Where in the world did you come from?"

It was kind of nice. "Uh, the Land of Oz, pretty much," I said. The moment stretched on. "But this is it, right? We're done? Roll credits?"

The credits did not roll. Something about all of it felt *very* wrong. "Well, don't just stand there," Auntie Em said. "Come inside and we'll draw you a nice, warm bath."

Oh, no. Oh, *fuck* no. If anything, the Depression-era Kansas dustbowl felt even more real than Oz had, and it was several times more depressing. I looked down at my feet—the silver shoes had *gone transparent*. They were fading away before my eyes. I clicked them together quickly times. "Take me to the mall in Calabasas! To *my* home!"

Nothing happened. Like the Flying Monkeys, the shoes could only

transport me to places inside the Oz Matrix. There was no way I was going to let myself get trapped, and grow old and paranoid and bitter, like that fucking Wizard.

That fucking Wizard. Was *he* the key? Had he managed to escape, somehow, in his balloon? I clicked my heels again.

"Take me to the fucking Wizard!"

With another whoosh I was gone—I hoped this gust of wind wouldn't wreck Auntie Em's new house, but to be honest, I had my own shit to worry about. When I regained my senses this time, though, I didn't find myself safe on some patch of grass. I was high up in the sky, and somehow managed to just grab the edge of the balloon's passenger basket to avoid falling toward my death on the inhospitable landscape far below.

"Dorothy! You found me!" Oz looked like hell. His hair was blowing wildly in the rough winds, his fine clothes were in tatters, and he stared at me like he was *fucking nuts*. The Wizard was *far* around the bend. It had been days since we'd left the Emerald City—had he been up in the balloon the entire time?

"I'm almost there!" he shouted. "See the hatch? That's where they send the weather from! But I'm going *through* it!"

I didn't see any hatch, but I did see the dark, inverted cone of a tornado—no, make that *three* tornadoes, whirling violently around us. The Wizard was somehow managing to pilot his craft between them.

My legs were still dangling off the edge of the basket. I tried to click my heels, but my socks just bumped together soundlessly. The silver shoes had either disappeared or fallen.

'They sent the weather to stop me!" Oz howled. "But not this time! *We won't be stopped*!"

One of the cyclones blew dangerously close, and the wind almost whipped me right off of my perch. Somewhere inside the maelstrom, I saw a flash of neon light. *EDUTAINMENT*.

"The tornadoes are the way out!" I cried, trying to be heard above the wind. "I'm sure of it! I saw the booth! From the mall!"

"I'm not going back to the mall!" he shouted. "They took me to Oz and just *left* me there, for *twenty-five years*, with nothing to do! And I want to know why!" He shook his fist at the sky. "You hear me? DO YOU HEAR ME? I want some goddamned answers!"

For the first time, I genuinely felt bad for him. The poor son of a bitch

wasn't even the main character in *his own voyage through literature*. He pressed himself against the inside of the basket and reached toward me with one arm.

"Come *with* me, Dorothy! We'll figure out what this whole thing was, after all this time! *We'll find out together*."

I *did* want to know what the hell was going on. And maybe there *was* a secret escape hatch somewhere up there in the sky. But I had stuff waiting for me at home. And given the choice between figuring out what the hell any of this was, and my life, I'd pick cell phones and Netflix and Tumblr, and Madeline, and my Mom.

Every time.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," I muttered under the wind. The tornado was almost upon me, and I flung myself away from the basket, falling backwards into the chaos of the cyclone's embrace, and immediately passing out.

* * *

At the end of the day, being shanghaied by a mall librarian and left for dead in a children's book was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. And, yeah, when I get the chance to look back at it with some perspective, I might decide it was the best thing that ever happened to me, too—meeting wonderful friends, growing as a person, all that bullshit. But whatever else it was, it was *definitely* the worst.

When I woke up, I was lying on a vast expanse of red sand. A green-skinned monster with tusks and a brass loincloth towered over me—he must have been fifteen feet tall, at least—and tapped my side with a long spear that he carried in two of his four arms.

So far, I amended. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to me *so far*.

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO

WARLORD OF MARLORD OF

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS

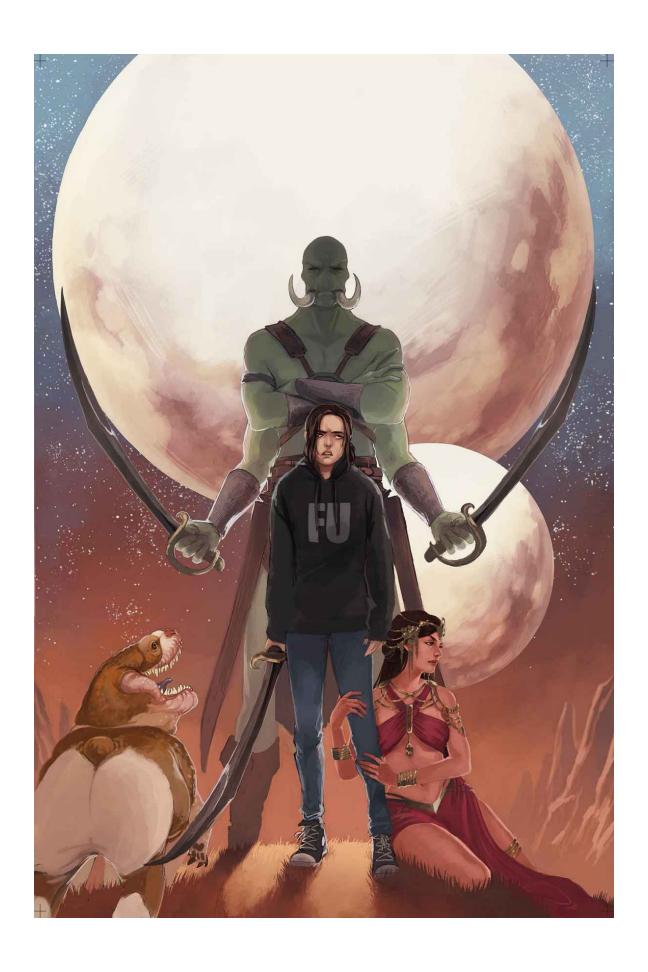
A. GRIMSBRO, WARLORD OF MARS

(IT'S A WHOLE STORY)

MATYQUNGMARK AND SOME JERK NAMED EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS



ATHERTON HAIGHT, SEATTLE



LINDY WEST,

who I have never met.

If this book is good at all, though, it's because . I tried to be half as funny as she is.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

If you've already read the first Arabella Grimsbro book, *Arabella Grimsbro Versus the "Wonderful" Wizard*, you know that it was a beloved children's classic retold in such a way as to include eighty-seven instances of the word "fuck."

Because *A Princess of Mars* was originally intended for those with more mature sensibilities, we don't feel the need to caution readers as strongly about the coarseness of the language that lies herein. If you are concerned, however, you should know that, including the one on this page, this manuscript features one hundred and seventy-five.

Also, everybody's naked.

Cheers!

INTRODUCTION.

In Edgar Rice Burroughs's intro to *A Princess of Mars*, he does this whole thing where he pretends to be the nephew of his main character, John Carter. And of course John Carter used to visit the old family plantation before the Civil War, and he was super duper manly, and the best at riding horses, and *even the slaves* thought he was great. Like, the author makes a specific point to mention that John Carter was *beloved by his family's slaves*. Yeah. Edgar Rice Burroughs was the fucking *worst*. So here's my version of the self-gratifying wank fest that was the original introduction to this book:

Oh, hello. My name's Coco and I live in the future, and when I was a little girl an old woman named Arabella Grimsbro used to visit my family for some reason. She taught me how to curse and utterly loathed every single thing in the entire world. We didn't own any slaves, of course, since it was not the Deep South or the *18 fucking 60s*, but if we had, Old Lady Grimsbro would have helped them rise up and massacre us in our sleep. Because, you know. Don't own slaves.

When I knew her, Old Lady G. was working on her memoirs, as she called them, which meant she was either senile as balls or had lived a *very* interesting life. They were basically just old, out-of-copyright novels rewritten with her as the lead character and the word "fuck" three times in every paragraph. I remember very clearly what she told me when she finished the second volume.

"Coco," she said, "this story is stupid, and you don't need to bother reading it. I learned nothing from the experience, except that, despite earlier concerns, I was in no danger of becoming a mind-controlled KGB assassin. I stabbed like a million aliens to death in this book, and even though it was kind of fun at first, unless you are a psychopath, stabbing things to death gets pretty old pretty fast.

"You're not a psychopath, are you, Coco? OK, good.

"The thing is, the first story I was trapped in was a children's book, which means it was written for 8-year-old girls. This one, however, was a *men's adventure novel*, which means it was written for *14-year-old boys*. I'm not saying it's charmless, but if I thought adventuring through Oz was awful, I was in for the shock of a motherfucking lifetime when I landed in *Barsoom*.

"It did have another dog, though. Sort of. So that part was okay."

Old Lady G. went on to write between one and six hundred more books before dying mysteriously in her sleep and leaving me, Coco, her entire fortune, which was exactly zero dollars, because apparently rewriting public domain literature with more swear words wasn't the goldmine we all assumed it was.

The end. *Utterly and sincerely yours, COCO WHATEVER, THE FUTURE*

PROLOGUE.

OUR STORY THUS FAR.

Okay, a lot of you have probably already read the first entry in this series, in which case feel free to skip ahead. But if you're primarily interested in half-naked space ladies, or whatever, and have zero fucks to give about the magical land of Oz, here's everything you need to know so you don't have to go back and read a whole other book before getting to whatever you imagine the good stuff here is going to be.

My name's Arabella, I'm fifteen, and I *probably* hate you. No offense—I pretty much hate everyone, except for my Mom (who was born in Peru and is awesome) and my best friend Madeline (who is the reason I wound up in this whole mess to begin with). I was at the mall waiting on Madeline's goofy, love-struck ass when I wandered into a shop called Voyages Through Literature. A slightly desperate saleslady there bribed me with twenty bucks to be part of what she called "market research," but I would have called "kidnapping and child endangerment."

They only had ancient, public domain literature voyages to choose from, so I wound up in the land of Oz, playing the part of Dorothy (keep in mind that this was the book version rather than the movie version, which meant there was way less singing and significantly more casual wolf murder).

The Scarecrow was creepy-looking as hell, the Tin Woodsman was weirdly hot, and the Cowardly Lion straight-up tried to maul us when we first met him. The actual Wizard turned out to be a 40-something neckbeard who had been trapped there since he got abducted himself at a mall in the 1980s. I never did figure out if I was actually, like, FOR REAL in a magical fantasy land or if it was all some kind of hallucination or computer trickery. Eventually I decided that even if it was a simulation, it was such a convincing one that the point was moot. Whatever it was, it was Oz, and I was in it.

So I killed the Wicked Witch (who was THE WORST), and the Wizard sailed off in his stupid balloon, just like in the movie I had seen a billion times. But the thing *just wouldn't end*, and this was the part where I genuinely started to worry that I had lost my goddamned mind. We had to keep traipsing around the countryside looking at a bunch of half-baked China Doll Countries and whatnot until L. Frank Baum finally met his word count goal and sent Dorothy to the sweet relief of Depression-era Kansas.

But I wanted to be trapped there even less than I wanted to be trapped in the Emerald City, so I used the magic slippers to teleport me back to the Wizard, and discovered him still in his balloon, dodging tornadoes and frothing at the mouth about whatever conspiracy dumped us both in Oz to begin with. So I made WHAT I THOUGHT was a climactic, character-defining decision to choose my normal teenage life in Calabasas, California, over finding out what the hell had even happened to me. Except I didn't even get *that*. Instead, I woke up in a desert of red sand under two moons with a giant, green, four-armed monster poking a spear at me. So there you go. You're all caught up.

Enjoy the boobies.

CHAPTER I.

MY ADVENT ON MARS.

When you spend weeks sleeping in a gross forest or a tiny, cramped Munchkin bed or whatever, waking up in an unexpected place eventually loses its shock value. There are only so many times you can do the whole "holy balls, it wasn't a dream" schtick before you just kind of groan, accept that your life is shit now, and get on with your day. So even though I had hoped to see a mall interior when I regained consciousness, I was prepared to accept the red desert and two giant moons in the late afternoon sky at face value.

Giant green monsters, however, still packed a bit of a punch. So I screamed (shut up—you would have, too).

When I say "giant," I'm not messing around, either. The thing must have been fifteen feet tall. And I need you to understand how big *fifteen feet* is. A regulation basketball hoop is *ten* feet. The very biggest elephant is maybe *thirteen* feet. I'm five-foot-four in my sneakers, so if you had one Arabella standing up straight, then put another Arabella on her shoulders, and a third Arabella on *her* shoulders, this fucking thing would *still* be a foot taller than all of us combined. And have *almost* as may arms. And *probably* more teeth.

Okay, I was too busy freaking the hell out to count its teeth, but it seemed like it had a lot, two of which were massive, razor-sharp tusks. It was hunched over snarling, with one bug-eye fixed on me and the other rotating to scan the horizon. Its nose slits were flared, and its antennae-ear things were... well, just kind of *there*, but definitely adding to the whole terrifying effect. When it poked at me with a ginormous spear, I jumped about nine feet into the air.

That part is not hyperbole. In my instinctual, desperate attempt to get on my feet, I found myself sailing into the air, and landed unceremoniously on my ass a short distance away. What the *actual fuck*? Apparently it wasn't the kind of thing people normally did around these parts, because Greenzo

Four Arms looked every bit as surprised as I was. I experimented with another hop, and bounded even farther away, this time managing to keep my balance as I landed. So I just kept on leaping, like some sort of really stupid superhero. I wound up sprawled on my face or back maybe one out of every four jumps, but nevertheless made good time, and soon the monster disappeared over the horizon behind me.

Once I got the hang of landing it might have been kind of fun, if I wasn't so completely and utterly *pissed*. I had *finished* the damned book! I was supposed to be safe in my own bed at this very moment, surrounded by loved ones gaslighting me with their assurances that I had dreamed the entire thing.

But instead I was... shit, where was I, anyway? The whole place was so much more barren and half-assed than Oz had been. Had I slipped into some kind of holding area in between voyages where they kept the leftover giant nightmare monsters? Something about the red sand, the two moons, and that bug-eyed creature screamed *alien landscape* to me, though. I'm not sure how, but I knew in my gut, as sure as I'd ever been about anything in my life, that I was on the *planet fucking Mars*.

This must be some shitty, hundred-year-old science fiction novel. Did they even *have* science fiction a hundred years ago? Did they even have *science*?

Oh, crap. Suddenly I realized that, assuming I *had* been dumped into a whole new story, *there was no movie version of this one*. I had constantly second guessed myself in Oz, but at least I had some beloved-ass childhood memories of Judy Garland to clue me in on the book's general plot. Now I didn't even know what the book *was*. And if I was supposed to escape this Martian hellscape by completing the story, I'd have no way to be sure if I was right on track or going wildly off script. For all I knew, at that very moment I was supposed to be back over the horizon fighting that alien behemoth. Or making friends with it. Or baking it goddamned fudge brownies or whatever.

Most of that would probably depend on what kind of book this was. With any luck, it would be another children's story, because despite all the messed-up shit that happened in Oz, the bulk of it wound up being weirdly civilized, which had worked out nicely for me. But I remembered seeing *Sense and Sensibility* and all sorts of crap like that on the list back in the

mall store, so this one could be just about anything. Did they even *make* any old-ass, beloved children's books that were science fiction?

The Little Prince maybe—that kid flew around on asteroids and shit, right? Man, if I had to learn *French* for this stupid thing, I was going to be *livid*.

I landed on a patch of yellow moss, stared up at the sky, and screamed at the top of my lungs. FUCK THIS PLACE. And fuck the land of Oz, and fuck that stupid fucking mall store and that sexy librarian woman with her stupid fucking glasses and her stupid fucking lies. Fuck the fact that I played by the rules and still got shit on over and over again. And fuck the fact that I couldn't even STOP playing by the rules, because now I didn't even know WHAT THE RULES FUCKING WERE. I'd be better off leaping right back into the desert and letting that alien eat me, or run me through with his twenty-foot spear.

Just the thought of it gave me a chill. In Oz, I had found myself in genuine peril more than once, which got me wondering what would happen if I died in the book. If it was all some sort of hallucination, I might just wake up at the mall or a creepy laboratory somewhere back in the real world. That was a pretty big *if*, though. And I couldn't do it. No matter how sucky things got, I couldn't bring myself to take that risk.

Sigh. Okay, buck the fuck up, Arabella. I rose slowly to my feet and took stock of my surroundings. I had left the red sands behind, and was now on a plain of moss-covered hills, peppered with rocky outcroppings that sparkled in the late afternoon sun. There was no foliage to be seen, which meant the easy pickings of Oz's fruit trees were off the table. And no water that I could see, either. Off in the distance, however, I spotted a low, walled structure. So I took a step toward it—and launched two feet into the air, completed a three-quarter somersault and landed flat on my back. Jesus Christ. As if to rub my face in the fact that I was starting from scratch, this book was going to make me LITERALLY LEARN HOW TO WALK AGAIN.

Ugh. *Fine*. I practiced taking tiny, careful steps, and by the time I reached the structure, I was beginning to get the hang of it. For those keeping score at home, Stupid Mars Book was *officially the worst*.

I didn't spot any openings in the smooth, stone wall, but it was only about four feet tall so I peeked over it. Inside the enclosure was a round building with a glass roof that covered hundreds of smooth, white eggs that

were bigger around than I was. A few of them had already hatched, and the goo-covered creatures clawing their way out of their shells were equal parts disgusting and ADORABLE.

They looked like infant versions of the creature I had encountered earlier, with scrawny bodies and big, giant bobble heads. They were blinking their googly eyes in the sunlight, and crawling around on all six limbs like gross alien baby lambs. I couldn't take my eyes off them. Now there was something I could imagine showing up in an out-of-copyright kid's book. Of course, if this was some sort of sci-fi Goldilocks scenario, that would probably mean their mother was—

I heard a soft rattling behind me and turned around to discover TWENTY GIANT GREEN ALIENS MOUNTED ON EVEN LARGER ALIEN STEEDS.

Seriously, you *would not* think that was the kind of thing that could motherfucking *sneak up on you*. Their mounts each had eight massive legs —because, sure, why not throw even more limbs on there—smooth, gray skin, and padded feet that evidently made them quiet as *hell*. The rider in front was thrusting his spear right at me.

So I did pretty much the only thing I could do, which was to leap up to the top of the incubator building. Since I was still getting the hang of the gravity, though, I wound up clearing the entire structure and landing a hundred feet away on the opposite side. All of which seemed to impress the aliens. A handful of them rushed forward to make sure I hadn't been messing with their offspring, and the others kind of just pointed at me and whispered to one another.

I guess it made sense that my mad jumping skills would impress them—if they grew up on Mars they would have Mars-muscles that were designed to walk normally in this screwed-up gravity, and not do Superman jumps like me. I considered trying to leap right the hell out of there, but took a closer look at my attackers and decided against it. For one thing, I had no way of knowing how fast their mounts could travel. But even if they couldn't actually catch me, the Martians were armed with more than just spears. They also had *extremely* fancy rifle things. They were like ten feet long and had *scopes*, which made it look like their effective range was about a hundred fucking miles.

Looking at those rifles, my heart sank. They were intricately carved and lovingly, like, *molded* and shit. I don't know, however you make a rifle. I

could spend a whole paragraph just describing them, which made me realize that the original author of this book probably *did*. The spears, too, had all sorts of fancy bronze crap all over them—whoever wrote this thing cared *a lot* about weapons. Which meant there was probably either going to be a whole bunch of fighting, or a whole bunch of me getting shot in the head at range.

As if to underscore the point, the Martians rode a couple of hundred yards out into the hills, leaving just one of their number—their leader, I guess—alone at the incubator. He dismounted, tossed his spear, rifle, and about a dozen smaller weapons I hadn't even noticed yet to the ground at his feet. Then he walked slowly around the building, stopped about thirty feet away from me, and spoke.

"GROOOOOONK!" At least, I *think* he was speaking. The Martian unclasped an enormous metal armlet from one limb and held it out toward me. It was just about all he was wearing, other than a harness thing to carry his weapons, and a whole loincloth situation that covered his junk, so I guess if he was going to offer me a piece of his clothing, that's the one I'd pick.

I slowly raised both my hands up to the height of my head, palms forward, but decided that felt more like "I surrender" than "we come in peace." So I put one of them over my heart instead. And bowed, because bowing was a thing, right?

"Um, are we cool here?" He just stared at me. "Overtures of peace, and all that? You know, *groooooonk*, or whatever?" He was still holding out the armlet, so I stepped forward slowly in my half-hopping, baby deer gait, took it gingerly from his enormous hand, and hung it around my neck. Then I gave him an extremely awkward smile, and waited.

After the most uncomfortable silence of my life, he stretched out his wide, ghoulish mouth to smile back. Then he reached out with one of his lower arms, took my hand, and walked me back to his horse thing. His followers started galloping back toward us, but he signaled them to chill out, and they slowed to a walk. I guess he was trying not to spook me.

I had no idea if I should be reassured by this, or *extra* terrified.

He exchanged a few words with his men, including a variety of noises that sounded much more like actual language in addition to the gronks. Then he gestured toward one of them, who lifted me up with an indeterminate number of arms and plopped me down on his shiny, hairless

monster horse behind him. I grabbed the Martian by the straps of his harness—because, you know, what else was I going to grab—and we turned and galloped off with the rest of the cavalcade, into the mossy hills.

CHAPTER II.

A PRISONER.

We rode for maybe ten or fifteen miles, until we came to a huge, ancient-looking city. Most of the buildings looked abandoned, which made sense considering that their doorways were much too small for the Martians to pass through comfortably. The stairs we climbed as we entered the city—quite easily, since the padded feet of our eight-legged monster horses could handle just about any terrain—also looked like they were built for people closer to my size than my captors.

Apparently, green giants weren't the only inhabitants of Mars.

And yeah, I said "captors." I might have come more or less willingly, but I only did so because I was ninety percent sure they would shoot me if I tried to escape, and that made me their prisoner. We rode into a plaza where maybe a thousand Martians congregated. There were full-sized males and smaller, lighter-green Martians that turned out to be women—they were about ten or twelve feet tall instead of fifteen, and bore other, more subtle differences as well, such as tusks that were longer in proportion to their faces, and, for some reason, fingernails.

At least the fingernails weren't *painted*. This book was probably written a century ago, so I half expected the women to have bows and long eyelashes to distinguish them from the men. There were also children of various ages and sizes, but nobody who looked like a Martian old-person.

This, I would later learn, is because being a green Martian pretty much sucked. They were your stereotypically brutal, warlike Klingon types, and the vast majority of them died in wars, hunting accidents, or were picked off as children by the giant white apes who ran wild in the Martian countryside. The few who did make it to old age made a voluntary pilgrimage down the cold, dark waters of the river Iss, where nobody knew what happened because no Martian had ever returned.

All of which I sincerely hoped was being saved for a sequel, because I had zero desire to find out what kind of fucked up shit happened at the end

of the river Iss.

Of course, I didn't know any of this at the time. We rode through the plaza to a huge marble structure that was studded with gaudy, glittering gems—*oh*, *how I missed Oz*—and had a vast entryway large enough for the Martians to fit through. We dismounted and entered the hall.

Hilariously, no one had bothered to clean the furniture out of the place, so ornately carved, wooden chairs and desks and stuff—all human-sized—were scattered throughout. Evidently it had once functioned as a *vast*, *majestic Martian office building*. Now, however, it was a throne room. Forty or fifty Martian men were assembled amongst the tiny, useless furniture around a raised platform, where the largest Martian I had seen yet sat, decorated with jewels, colorful feathers, and a fur-lined, silk cape.

Go big or go home, I guess. I don't know what I had been expecting, but those sons of bitches straight up *took me to their leader*.

The boss of the group who had captured me approached his chief and engaged in the customary Martian greeting, which turned out to be basically saying their names to each other. Conveniently, this was where I learned that my captor's name was Tars Tarkas. He appeared to be some sort of Martian Vice President, and he made a few brief statements to the chief, presumably explaining why he was carting around a tiny fifteen-year-old girl with too few arms who could jump really high.

Actually, that reminded me that I had no idea what the Martians were seeing when they looked at me. In Oz, everyone saw me as ten-year-old Dorothy in a checkered blue dress, even though I was fifteen and had on the same black hoodie and jeans I was wearing now. If I could find a mirror, it would go a long way toward figuring out what kind of book I was in—although at this point I was pretty sure I would see a muscle-bound action hero staring back at me.

When Tars Tarkas finished, the chief turned to me and spoke at some length.

"Yeah," I said once he finished, "I didn't understand *any* of that. Do you guys have magical science fiction communicator devices or something? Or, like, *Google Translate*?" I smiled awkwardly to indicate that this was supposed to be funny—I didn't actually smile all that much in real life, but it appeared to be the only thing these folks understood. The chief smiled back, which, again, I thought was encouraging at the time.

This was before I learned that things green Martians thought were funny included the agonizing death of their close friends and torturing prisoners in inventive, excruciating ways. Like I said, being a green Martian *suuuuuuuuuked*.

The assembled group (I assumed they were all advisors and various subchieftains, like the Secretary of Martian Agriculture or whatever) looked intrigued, and several of them started poking at my shoulders and rubbing the sleeves of my hoodie. I wasn't sure what they thought they were feeling—probably bulging man muscles, which wasn't homoerotic *at all*—but I wanted no part of it. As I shrugged off their attempts to cop a feel, the chief rose from his throne and motioned at me to follow him outside.

Keep in mind that gravitational challenges made me walk like both my feet were asleep and I desperately had to pee. The Martians seemed to take this as some kind of insult, because they booed and hissed at me as I shuffled toward the door. So I figured I'd hop across the room from desk to desk—and misjudged the height of the ceiling, crashing hard and banging the crap out of my shins on a piece of office furniture on the way back down. This, of course, delighted the crowd.

One particular giant, though, was not amused. He jerked me to my feet, then leaned over and shouted something right into my face, gesturing with his two left arms toward the door.

"What do you want from me, dude? I can *walk* or I can *hop*. Those are, like, the TWO WAYS I know how to get from one pace to another on this STUPID PLANET." He took my displeased sarcasm as open aggression (the line between the two was admittedly pretty fine), snarled, and raised a fist.

Crap. Here we go.

If my instincts were right, this was the part in the story where I took his actions as an affront to my manly honor, or whatever, and resorted to fisticuffs. If I was *wrong*, though, this was probably the part where I was pummeled to death by a four-armed alien behemoth. The language barrier meant reasoning was off the table, though, and to be honest he *was* kind of pissing me off. So I punched him right in the empty space between his tusks where his nose was supposed to be.

He folded like a lawn chair, and hit the floor about twenty feet from where I stood. *Huh*. Apparently, my arms were as ridiculously overpowered as my calves on this planet. The assembled Martians were dumbfounded,

and just stared at me in silence for a moment. Then, as one, they broke out into an uproarious cheer.

And that's when I knew for sure what kind of book I was stuck in. It wasn't just going to put me in positions where I'd have to resort to violence, it was going to *actively cheer* for me when I did. In the real world, when some asshole decides his stupid honor is at stake or whatever and refuses to back down, the *other guy* is inevitably starring in his own action-adventure story inside *his* head, and doesn't back down either. And that's how minor traffic accidents escalate to the point where somebody gets shot. But in this story, the manliest guy in the room was going to get to punch everybody with impunity to prove how big his dick was. Whatever book I was in, it wasn't *The Little* fucking *Prince*.

I could either look for ways to subvert the tropes of toxic masculinity, though, or just play along and get the hell out of Mars as quickly as possible. As for my opponent, he just lay where he fell, motionless and utterly ignored by his fellow Martians. Shit, I hadn't *killed him*, had I? Before I could find out, I was whisked outside by my adoring fans.

Once out in the open plaza, Tars Tarkas approached me, grinning. "Sak!" he said. "Sak! Sak! Sak!"

"Okay, you know that I don't know what that means."

He held out his arms in a goofy pantomime and made a small jump. "Sak!" he said, hopping two more times. "Sak, sak!"

Ugh. *Fine*. They clearly wanted an exhibition, so I made a mighty leap, a good fifty feet into the air, and landed squarely on my feet. Then I bounded back to Tarkas in three hops.

"Tah-dah," I said. "There, I sakked."

Hundreds of Martian spectators had gathered around, though, and they all about lost their shit. "Sak!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Sak! Sak!" Soon they had a chant going. The Martian chief looked at me solemnly, and repeated the demand. I was getting hungry, though, and thirsty, and quite frankly tired of this bullshit.

"You know what? No," I said. I rubbed my stomach and pointed at my open mouth. "FOOOOD. First food, *then* sak."

The chief scowled, but Tars Tarkas said something to him, and they argued back and forth for a moment. Then Tarkas called someone out of the crowd. She was about eight feet tall and her complexion was somewhere in

between the yellowish color of the children and the light olive green of the adult women, so I was guessing that made her a teenager.

I didn't know it at the time, but she would pretty much wind up being my Martian big sister. She led me through the crowd into a building that, judging by the silks and furs thrown about all over the floor, was probably a sleeping chamber. "Okay, this is more *like it*," I said. "What do you have to eat in this place? Ooh, are there *meat pies*? Please tell me you guys know about meat pies."

She made a weird sort of hissing noise, and a creature about the size of a Shetland pony waddled in from the other room. It was hairless, had ten legs (the limbs on this planet seemed to continually escalate every time I ran into a new beast), and a wide, frog-like head equipped with three rows of sharp tusks. My chaperone looked it in the eyes and gave it a brief command, then left the room.

The beast turned to me, opened its mouth, and drooled.

CHAPTER III.

I ELUDE MY WATCH DOG.

Shit—had I not made it clear that I wanted to *eat* food, and not *become* food? Or was every single meal in this place going to involve a fight to the death with some hairless monster with an absurd number of legs? Like, on Mars, either you eat dinner or DINNER EATS YOU. Fortunately, my fears turned out to be groundless. The beast locked eyes with me for a moment, then crossed the room and plopped down in the doorway, presumably to block my escape. It reminded me *a lot* of a fat old Labrador Madeline's parents used to have. I actually kind of loved that dog.

Since I had been left alone, I took the opportunity to examine my surroundings. The room had a bunch of windows that I could probably bust through if I had to make a quick getaway, and murals and mosaics covering most of the walls. They looked like they could be centuries old, but they were all landscapes, so I couldn't determine whether they were made by the green giants or the theoretically smaller Martians who built this city in the first place.

Then I almost jumped out of my skin when I pulled open a curtain on the room's back wall to reveal a *full grown*, *completely naked man just standing there*.

Son of a bitch—it was a mirror. OF COURSE it was a mirror. Also, dude, put that thing away. Staring at yourself in a mirror and seeing naked man-flesh staring back was a bit surreal, and I actually had to double check to make sure I was still in my trusty hoodie and jeans. It took me a moment to fully grasp that I was not only in hundred-year-old science fiction power-fantasy, but one in which the main character had been walking around nude the whole time. Like, was it every guy's dream to fight epic battles against giant, four-armed aliens buck-ass naked? That was—it was just weird.

I couldn't help but chuckle. And when the Martian girl returned with a tray of food and drink in her lower arms, I burst out in a full-fledged laugh. OH MY GOD. Was this going to be *that kind* of book? Like, was she going

to serve me dinner and then *succumb to my rugged*, *manly charms*? I mean, I could get on board with the extra arms and the height, but those *tusks*—I had settled into a mild titter, but the absurdity of it almost made me double over laughing. She put the tray down on the floor next to me, and then sat down on the far side of the room and stared at me intently.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not laughing at *you*. I'm Arabella, by the way." I knew she didn't speak English, of course, but treating her like a normal human being made me feel less alone on this god-forsaken space rock. "Thank you for bringing me dinner. And sorry about, *you know*." I gestured toward my crotch area. "*That* whole situation."

Dinner turned out to be slightly acidic-tasting milk and something cheese-like that was almost completely flavorless. I shuddered to think what kind of animal they came from, but I hadn't eaten anything since Oz, so I choked down as much of it as I could stomach. The sun had set rapidly as I ate, and with a full belly, the day's leaping and punching activities finally started to catch up with me.

"This is, like, a bedroom, right?" The Martian girl kept her eyes on me, but made no attempt to reply. "Is it okay if I chill out on these silks over here? That dog's not going to eat me if I fall asleep, is he?"

If I had learned anything in my literary travels so far, it was to sleep whenever and wherever I could. Since nobody protested, I curled up in a corner and drifted off surprisingly fast. Sometime during the night, I awoke with a shiver—the room was pitch black and had gotten much colder during the night. Someone had thrown a fur over me, but I had wriggled myself out from under it in my sleep. In the darkness, a hand reached out and pulled it back over me, shortly afterward adding a second fur to my covering.

I grunted my thanks and slept soundly until daylight, which came on quickly, almost as if someone had flicked a switch. Okay, that was weird. Was there some kind of science that explained that—Mars' thinner atmosphere or something? It reminded me that while I was technically in a science fiction novel (or possibly a science fiction *softcore porn*), it was a really old, public domain one, so I had no idea how crazy and made up the science parts were going to be.

I rose to my feet and my big Martian watch dog—who was still laying in the doorway in exactly the same position he had been in last night—rose with me. Half a dozen sleeping Martian women now covered the floor, but none of them stirred. The significance of me lying all naked in a room full

of *truly* exotic alien women wasn't lost on me, but right now I was more interested in what this animal was going to do if I tried to leave the building.

Something about the ridiculousness of seeing myself in that mirror had broken me out of my funk. I had been all worried about following the plot of this story, but since there was no way to know what that plot was even supposed to be, I figured that my best bet was to push as many boundaries as I could. I mean, I was a *superhero* in this place. I could *literally* leap tall buildings in a single bound, and if there were any locomotives on Mars, I felt like I was *at least* as powerful as one. The dog monster had that huge mouth full of crazy-looking teeth, but with its stubby little legs, I was confident I could outjump it. In fact, I could probably outpace it at a brisk walk, so all I had to do was get *past* it and I should be free and clear.

I slowly moved toward the beast, and it cocked its head at me. As I approached, it cautiously backed up, and when I reached the doorway it moved to the side and let me pass. Huh. *That* was easy. It then fell in behind me and followed at about ten paces as I made my way through the deserted streets. Was it possible that its job wasn't to keep me prisoner at all, but to *protect me from harm*?

I stopped, and it kept walking until it was just a few feet behind me, then lowered three sets of legs into a sitting position. "Who's a good boy?" I asked. The thing jumped back to its feet and wiggled its tail-less behind. "Are YOU a good boy?" It spun in a quick circle, and straight-up *barked*.

Okay, that was adorable. I scratched it behind a lump on the side of its face that might have been an ear. "I'm going to go ahead and call you Toto." Who knew how many stupid books I was going to wind up getting stuck in? I didn't have the patience to be learning different *dog names* for each and every one.

I continued through the city and found it eerily quiet. Martians, it appeared, were late sleepers, which suited me just fine. When we got to the edge of town, though, Toto had another surprise in store. He (I didn't have any clue to his actual gender, but Regular Toto had been a boy dog, so that's how I started thinking of Giant Monster Toto as well) suddenly sprang in front of me and bared his tusks.

So I *was* a captive there, with the entire city as my prison. I hadn't specifically been planning to escape, but if the Martians had ordered their watch dog to stop me, I sure as hell was now. And if they had wanted me to

be afraid of my guardian, they shouldn't have given me one who acted like such a goofy sweetheart. "Are you a big, scary watch dog, Toto?" Toto growled, trying his best to look ferocious. "Well, what do you think about *this*?"

I leapt over his head, two hundred feet out into the desert. I was confident that I could move faster than Toto could, and figured I'd leap around the desert for a while until he gave up on trying to herd me and hopefully just settled for being my pet. When I turned around, however, Toto was BARRELING TOWARD ME FASTER THAN I'D EVER SEEN ANY LIVING THING MOVE IN MY ENTIRE LIFE. Like, if I was Super Naked Jumping Man, he was the motherfucking *Dog Flash*. His stubby little legs were a blur, and his teeth were gnashing. He didn't look like he was playing *at all*.

It was all I could do to hurl myself back over him toward the city before he caught me in his jaws. There was no way *in hell* I was ever going to outrun this thing. He spun around in the dirt and bolted toward me, so I kept right on jumping, up into a window about thirty feet from the ground, in the face of a building overlooking the valley. Suddenly my Martian watch dog had become a STRAIGHT-UP NIGHTMARE, and I had no intention of returning to the street below until I was sure he had calmed the fuck down.

I settled into a crouch, but before I had the chance to check on Toto's demeanor, a massive hand grasped me by the neck from behind and dragged me violently into the room. I was thrown on my back, and standing over me was a colossal ape-like creature, white and hairless except for an enormous shock of bristly hair on top of its head.

CHAPTER IV.

A FIGHT THAT WON FRIENDS.

So this chapter is basically one big fight scene. And unlike the original author of this book (I did eventually figure out who he was, and—spoiler alert—it's that fucker who wrote *Tarzan*) I could give two shits about fight scenes. So this is going to go much quicker than it would if you were reading the hundred-year-old public domain version. Two important things happen here, though: 1) I bond like crazy with Toto, my beloved, tenlegged, hairless, pony-sized, frog-faced wonder pup, and 2) the green Martians get to be extremely impressed with how good I am at killing enormous, four-armed gorillas.

Yes, the thing that grabbed me had six limbs—and if you're disappointed that it didn't continue the trend line by clocking in at twelve, never fear, because there were fucking TWO OF THEM. They were *huge*, too. Maybe not quite as tall as the green warriors, but like ten times as wide. One of them pinned me down with its foot, and the other lifted a massive stone club and swung it straight at my head.

I was a hundred percent sure that was it. That was how I was going to die. And it didn't feel like some bullshit video game thing, either, where I would "die," and then wake up in the real world or go back to a stupid save point or whatever. It felt EXACTLY like I was about to be permanently ended by a giant goddamned gorilla. So you can imagine my elation when a bolt of multi-legged horror hurled itself through the doorway and tackled the beast who was about to end me.

Yay, Toto! The gorilla on top of me freaked the hell out and straight-up jumped out the window. The other one was locked in kind of a death grip with my dog—Toto's massive jaws were clamped around it, but it also had three or four hands around Toto's throat, and I wasn't sure which of them would pass out first.

So I grabbed the stone club—it probably weighed a ton but, remember, I was a superhero on Mars so no bigs—and smacked that monkey on its

head. Which popped open *like a water balloon*. I didn't even think I hit it that hard, but either I was *way* stronger on this planet than I even thought, or the book was compensating for my lack of enthusiasm by making the violence EXTRA GROSS.

Meanwhile, the first gorilla had apparently regained its composure and re-entered the building via the stairs, because it came charging back into the room through the doorway. It looked *pissed*, too. Improbable science-muscles or not, a hasty retreat felt like the best plan here.

"Come on, Toto, time to go!" Toto, however, was in rough shape. He lay gasping on the floor, staring at me with pleading, puppy-dog frog eyes.

The ape charged. Purely on instinct, I threw my club at it (I know, but cut me some slack, it was only my second gorilla fight), and hit it in the shins. Which, of course, only made it lose its balance and fall toward me *faster*. At this point, I was pretty much out of options, so I went with what I knew. I punched it in its big, stupid gorilla face.

Which worked *remarkably* well. The thing impacted with my fist and crumpled, falling to the floor and somehow managing to completely avoid crushing me with its elephantine mass. It lay there for a moment, stunned.

"Okay, are we done? Like, maybe you could just jump back out the window and return to your gorilla family in shame or something?" In response, the thing screeched in rage and started scrambling to its feet. *Son of a bitch*. I grabbed the club, and this time barely even tapped the ape on its thick skull. Sure as shit, it *exploded*. Like, monkey brains *everywhere*. It appeared that if a mighty death blow was scripted into this plot, I wasn't going to get away with any half measures.

A cheer broke out behind me, and I turned to see Tars Tarkas and a handful of other warriors gathered in the doorway. The Martian girl who had taken care of me the previous night was with them, but she wasn't celebrating with the others. In fact, she looked downright worried. It dawned on me that if they had put her in charge of me, she might be in a lot of trouble if I escaped.

"Uh, just doing some pest control before returning completely of my own volition for breakfast," I said. "You guys know this place is, like, *infested with gorillas*, right?"

The Martian girl rushed to my side and inspected me for damage. Again, I had no idea if my imaginary naked muscles had any bruises or

abrasions, but she seemed satisfied. She smiled, took my hand, and began leading me toward the door.

One of the warriors grunted something at me, then remembered I didn't speak Martian and asked his question to Tars Tarkas instead. Tarkas gave a reply, and the warrior pulled a handgun from its holster on his belt and pointed it at Toto, who was still spread out on the floor, panting.

"Wait, what?" I charged at him and struck his arm just as he fired the weapon, which missed Toto and blew a hole straight through the exterior wall of the building.

"Dude!" I said. "DO NOT KILL MY DOG!" I mean, what the fuck? Toto had just saved my life! And then I saved his! We were, like, *life-saving pals* now. I knelt beside him and helped him to his feet. "Come on, buddy, let's get out of here."

The Martian warriors looked utterly confused by my actions, and the one with the pistol said something to Tars Tarkas, who just shrugged. So I left. My stomach was gently churning at the sheer volume of monkey guts, and something told me that wasn't the sum total of gore I was going to have to endure in this thing.

CHAPTER V.

CHILD-RAISING ON MARS.

Child-raising on Mars is, as you may have guessed, *the worst*. But more on that in a bit.

Breakfast was an exact replica of the dinner I was served the night before, and *every single meal* I would be served the entire time I stayed with the green Martians. It felt like I was being punished for not appreciating Oz enough—oh, you hate being stuck in a land where everybody loves you and cooks you mouth-watering meat pies whenever you want? Well, enjoy LIVING IN A DESERT WASTELAND, SURVIVING EXCLUSIVELY ON ACID MILK AND FLAVORLESS MAYBE-CHEESE.

This was the point where I tried to learn my companion's name, and to teach her mine by thumping myself on the chest and saying "Arabella" over and over. I couldn't be sure if she grasped what I was getting at, since she never repeated my name back to me, but I finally decided to call her Sola. Based on her own gestures, it was either her actual name or the word for "Mars boobs."

After we finished eating, Sola escorted me out to the plaza, where we found the entire Martian community gathered among a herd of gargantuan animals. I know scale is impossible to keep track of in this fucking story, but the Martians themselves were fifteen-foot giants, and their horse things were big enough for them to ride on. These mammoths, in comparison, were big enough TO TRAMPLE THEM (Texas had nothing on Mars in the whole "shit's bigger here" department). The beasts were hairless and vaguely elephant-like, and each had four legs, as if the author had gotten bored coming up with an exotic number of limbs to put on every single creature, and just defaulted to the Earthly norm. Also, there were at least a couple hundred of them. The stench was ALL-ENCOMPASSING.

The Martians were harnessing big-ass chariots to the things (well, the women and children were, anyway—the adult males mostly watched). Sola

approached one of the animals, and it lowered its chin to the ground so its eyes were level with hers. She met its enormous gaze without making a sound, and suddenly it slumped its entire, massive body to the ground. An adolescent Martian then climbed up on its back, presumably to steer. Holy shit, did Sola just *order this thing to sit with her mind*?

She moved on to inspect the thing's harness, and the monster's gaze turned to me. Each of its eyes was bigger than my head, so needless to say, its stare was intense. Was it waiting for some sort of telepathic command? I already knew I could jump absurdly high and explode gorilla heads with a love tap—was it possible that I had psychic powers on this planet as well? There was only one way to find out.

How do you even go about making friends with something that's the size of an elephant TO AN ELEPHANT? Like, an elephant *squared*?

I tried to mimic the posture that Sola used, and concentrated on reaching out with my inner thoughts and feelings. I AM NOT HERE TO HURT YOU. (You definitely have to think in all caps when you're communicating telepathically with a mega-elephant.) YOU ARE THE MOST MAGNIFICENT ANIMAL I HAVE EVER LAID EYES UPON. IF YOU GIVE ME YOUR TRUST, I WILL GIVE YOU MINE IN RETURN.

At this point, the fucking thing tried to eat me.

Sola yanked me out of the path of its lunging jaws just in time, then dragged me around to the mega-elephant's rear and deposited me unceremoniously in the attached chariot. Yikes. That could have gone *very badly*.

We joined the caravan of behemoths heading out into the desert, and although the ride was surprisingly comfortable, it was *not* brief. Left alone with my thoughts (which were not even PSYCHIC ones, as far as I could tell), I settled into a good sulk.

I couldn't escape the feeling that my last-ditch attempt to escape Oz back at the end of the last book had been a terrible mistake. When I had looked down and seen the silver slippers disappearing off my feet in that sepia-toned Kansas dustbowl, I panicked. So I freaked out and ordered the shoes to bring me back to that asshole Wizard, which led me to ANOTHER goddamned tornado, and the mossy sands of Mars. If I had just left well enough alone, would the book have *just ended*? Would I be back home in Calabasas *right now*? Or would I currently be stuck in Depression-era Kansas, like I'd feared?

And if so, would that have been any worse than THIS?

I decided right then and there that whatever book I was in, whatever naked, muscle-y, ape-murdering Martian superhero I was supposed to be, I was going to do my level best to advance the plot, get to the end, and let whatever was supposed to happen HAPPEN so I could get myself the hell back home. I had lost track of the days back in Oz, but I was pretty sure it had been weeks and weeks since I left the real world. And if time WAS advancing at a normal pace back home—I never did figure out if this whole thing was a dream, or the Matrix, or whatever, but I had more or less driven myself insane worrying about it, so I was pretty much done with that whole shit show—my Mom would be *utterly wrecked* by now. And considering that my friend Madeline could find a way to feel personally responsible for *global fucking warming*, the chances that she blamed herself for dragging me to the mall on the day I disappeared were hovering around seven million percent. But I had moved past the stage of being worried about them.

Now I was PISSED.

FUCK YOU, Voyages Through Literature. Trapping me in your shitty, out-of-copyright fantasy lands was bad enough, but putting my friends and family through that? I would kill every goddamned giant gorilla on this planet if need be to return home and let them know I was still alive. And the sons of bitches at the mall shop had better HOPE I didn't get any psychic powers, because at that moment, I could have exploded heads with the sheer power of my hatred.

I heard a kind of honking bark-noise, and looked up to see Toto, my Martian pony-frog-dog, trotting along behind the chariot, looking none the worse for wear after his fight with the apes. Aww. Maybe this place wasn't *completely* awful. Of course, that *also* meant the Martian soldiers had planned to put him down for essentially being *winded*.

Ugh.

Our procession finally reached the open desert, and the whole cavalcade broke into a mad gallop. And I take back that whole "surprisingly comfortable" business—this part was so bumpy my teeth clattered, and for a few minutes I thought I might lose my breakfast cheese. After what felt like eternity (but was *probably* less than twenty minutes or so), we reached our final destination, and the drivers began parking their mega-elephant chariots with military precision... around the same egg incubator where this whole thing had started the previous day.

Son of a bitch. Well, so much for *advancing the fucking plot*. Tars Tarkas fetched me from my ride and ordered me to jump around some more, apparently for entertainment purposes. At that point the only Martian word I knew other than his name and Sola's name was *Sak*, the word for "jump." But I was a REALLY GOOD sakker, so I sakked all the hell over the place, and the crowd was suitably enthralled.

After the show, such as it was, Tarkas went to speak with the Martian chief, and I followed behind him. The chief's name, as far as I could understand, was Lorquas Ptomel, and he seemed like a pretty big asshole, so if this book was scheduled to have a big, bad villain any time soon, my money was on him. He gave some shitty, grunting orders, and a group of Martian warriors proceeded to break open the incubator wall, freeing the slimy Martian babies to scamper out all over the landscape.

These babies were snatched up by the women and children—even Sola got one. And that was it. They packed the little monsters into the chariots, and we all headed back to town.

This, I would discover, was about as much love and kindness as the Martian babies could expect to receive for the entirety of their lives. None of them had specific parents, and as far as the education they would receive from the community as a whole, it pretty much consisted of the language, weapons training, and the fact that if they proved themselves to be weak or defective in any way, they'd be *taken out and shot*. In fact, the hundred eggs that even made it to the incubator had been selected by a council of twenty (all male, of course) chief egg-inspectors, who only suffered the very best and most physically perfect eggs (by whatever arbitrary fucking egg standards they used) to be incubated and hatched at all.

I had no idea if this whole business was supposed to be read as a horror story, or an awesome, super-cool way to raise bad-ass warrior Martians. But at the end of the day it didn't really matter. You can tell a lot about an author by what kind of stupid science fiction bullshit they come up with, and my opinion of the guy who wrote this book was forming squarely in the "douchebag" category.

Over the next few days, Sola took it upon herself to train me right along with her new foster child, which was humiliating—to be sure—but also a tiny bit fun. My new schoolmate was about four feet tall (so, basically, almost as big as me), and rambunctious as fuck. I whiled away interminable hours while I waited for actual plot to start happening by trying to teach

him my name, and his own. (Which, I decided, was *Sparky*, since Sola didn't seem to have any interest in naming him, and it was the first thing that popped into my head.)

In fact, Sola didn't say much to him at all. She just did that thing she had done with the mega-elephant, where she stared into his eyes for a minute, then left him alone, satisfied that he was picking up whatever she was laying down. The more I saw her do it, the more certain I was that there was some psychic monkey business going on. Giving directives to a trained animal was one thing, but there was no way she was effectively communicating "it's time for bed, go lay down on your furs" with a *glance* to a fucking *newborn*.

So I decided to try again. After all, me and Sparky were bros! By Martian standards, at least—I mean, siblings weren't even a *thing* on this planet, but I was as close as he was probably ever going to get to a sister. I practiced my best Sola stare and tried thinking thoughts into his brain, but didn't seem to get anywhere at all. Hmm. Maybe I should focus on hearing *his* thoughts? I looked into his goofy little face and concentrated on becoming a psychic receiver. And sure as hell, *I got something*. It wasn't even language, really, but kind of raw, unfiltered *desire*. Nevertheless, as soon as I put my mind in the right mode to listen, it rang out as clear as a bell.

"SPARKY MURDER ARABELLA." Well, shit.

CHAPTER VI.

A FAIR CAPTIVE FROM THE SKY.

If nothing else, the next few days would shed interesting light on the whole nature-vs.-nurture child rearing debate. Because Sparky wanted to murder *everything*. I peeked into his mind while he tried to get to sleep that night, and he wanted to murder *his blankets*. I tried again the following morning at breakfast and got "SPARKY MURDER CHEESE." During weapon class that day (because, yes, that was the kind of book I was trapped in, the kind where we were LITERALLY TEACHING SWORD FIGHTING TO A NEWBORN), he wanted to murder his training sword. Not murder ME *with* the sword—murder *the sword itself*. And it wasn't like I was just mistranslating the word "murder," either. This was an empathic mind-link, and the urge to kill was *quite* clear.

I wasn't nearly as successful at reading Sola's thoughts, possibly because she wouldn't let me stare into her eyes the way I had with Sparky. But even so, I did manage to grab a few wisps of communication that might have been coming from her. From what I could gather, Sola regarded both of her charges with genuine affection, but was, at the same time, completely and utterly exasperated by every single thing that either one of us did.

On the third day after the whole incubator business, the Martians packed up all their stuff into mega-elephant chariots to leave, and from what I could gather, they weren't planning to return. Huh. I had kind of assumed this was their permanent home.

Just as we left the city behind us, however, orders went out for an immediate and hasty return. This was clearly something the Martians had trained for, too, because they melted *like mist* into the big, spacious doorways of the buildings nearby. Within a few minutes, the entire

cavalcade—mega-elephants, chariots and all—was nowhere to be seen. It was the last part that really got to me.

Where did they hide the mega-elephants?

Sola, Sparky, Toto, and I ducked into the same building where I had fought the apes—because, sure, why not—which meant that there was rotting gorilla carcass all over the walls, but at least I could see what was going on outside through the hole that had been made when that guy tried to kill my dog.

What was going on outside, it turned out, was *blimps*. Twenty sleek, gleaming airship things sailed elegantly over the hills toward the city. In the real world, blimps had those massive football-shaped balloon parts and comparatively tiny baskets underneath so they wouldn't be too heavy to fly. But these things were like ocean liners underneath. Either blimp gas on this planet was *much* more buoyant than what we had on Earth, or this was just more science fiction nonsense that wouldn't stand up to closer inspection. I mean, don't get me wrong. I had just come out of a book where I had teleportation shoes and conversations with straw sacks, but for some reason I felt that if this one was going to *pretend* to be science, it needed to hold itself to higher standards.

The airships sailed majestically toward the city—I had no way to know if they had spotted us before we dived for cover, or if they had been headed this way regardless. From the looks of them, though, I understood why we were staying out of their way. This was technology far beyond anything I'd seen so far. I had to imagine that anything that could build ships like those could also arm them with weapons that—

Before I even finished my thought, my Martian compatriots popped out of windows in the buildings around me and opened fire on the passing airships. Oh, shit. It wasn't a *super fast hiding drill* that they had trained for.

This was an *ambush*.

And it was a brutally, *horrifyingly* effective one, too. I found out later that each Martian warrior was trained to fire at a specific target on the ships —one contingent took out the sights on their guns, another one took out the gunners themselves, a third *specifically aimed at officers*. In moments, the surprise attack had completely decimated the fleet's capacity to retaliate. And the shots just *kept going* for—ten minutes? Twenty? The airships were veering off, trying to escape the volley, but the gunfire never let up, even as

the ships retreated. I could see tiny figures falling from them and plummeting to the desert below.

Hundreds of them.

All the ships managed to escape over the hills except for one, which had either lost steering, or every living soul on board with the ability to steer. It floated gently into the city, on a trajectory to crash into one of the taller buildings about a mile off. Martian warriors charged into the building and threw grappling hooks out the windows, hauling the thing to the ground below. There were no more sounds of fighting as they boarded the vessel—that part was over, at least. Now they had moved onto the looting, but I was in no mood to watch it. I wandered out into the streets, numb.

I had fucked up. I had monumentally, colossally, *horrendously* screwed the pooch. Maybe I was never supposed to have let myself be captured in the first place. Or maybe in the book, the naked guy kept on trying to escape after the whole business with the gorillas. But if I was the big, manly hero of Mars, the people in those ships were *who I was supposed to be protecting*. And the clan of nomadic mega-elephant herders I had thrown in with were the *bloodthirsty villains I was supposed to be protecting them from*. As I drifted through the city I saw the wreckage of the airship float off into the sky above me. *On fire*. Apparently, the clan had finished their pillaging, set it ablaze, and released it into the wild.

I felt a familiar, slimy snurfle on my hand, and turned to discover that Toto had been trailing behind me, as per usual. "What do you think, Toto? Are you ready to get *the fuck* out of Dodge?"

The answer I received wasn't from him, but from Sola, who shouted something that definitely didn't sound like "Arabella," but nevertheless rung in my ears like my own name. Maybe I was getting the hang of this telepathy thing after all. She rushed toward me, took my arm and began leading me back into the city. She looked pretty upset.

While I was trying to decide whether to break away and run right then, or wait until the cover of darkness, a contingent of Martian warriors passed us, escorting a small figure between them to the boos and hisses of a gathering crowd. And when I say small, I mean human-sized. The Martians had taken a *prisoner*.

And the prisoner was a *buck-naked supermodel*.

I mean, she had some jewelry and accessories and stuff, which gave me the impression that she *normally* ran around naked (as opposed to having been undressed by her captors). She had a regular number of arms and legs, her complexion was a reddish copper, and her body was straight out of a *Victoria's Secret* catalog—all soft skin and curves, but somehow not an ounce of fat anywhere that hadn't been explicitly approved for consumption by the ubiquitous male gaze. She was such a blatant adolescent straight male fantasy that at first she barely even registered as a *person*. It wasn't the kind of thing I expected to see on the dusty streets of Mars City. She spotted me in the crowd, and her gaze met mine.

"Guh," I said eloquently.

She looked as surprised to see me as I was to see her (which made sense, since I remembered that to others I *also* appeared to be walking around completely nude), and made a little sign at me with her free hand. Shit! Was that a *gang sign*? What were you even supposed to do when *a naked supermodel threw you a gang sign*? On *Mars*?

"Guh," I repeated.

What might have been a look of hope or renewed courage on her face faded into one of very clear dejection, loathing, and contempt. Then her captors dragged her out of my sight and into one of the deserted buildings.

So I pretty much screwed that up, too.

CHAPTER VII.

I LEARN THE LANGUAGE.

Sola led (well, let's be honest—pretty much dragged) me back to the building where we had made our home. I might not know for sure what book I was in, but I could recognize a damsel in distress when she marched past me naked, and I decided on the spot that I was going to rescue her, and we'd escape from the green Martians together.

The thing was, I wasn't just rescuing her from *them*. I was rescuing her from whatever kind of skeevy bullshit the long-dead author of this thing had planned. I was pretty sure that saving her was part of the plot, but for all I knew, he had written eight weeks of torture and fucking *rape slavery* into the story before Naked Muscle Guy was supposed to save the day. I already knew this book had violent ambush-killing, so pretty much nothing was off the table. I had to rescue her *soon*.

I figured my best bet was to play it cool.

"So, what's the deal with that new prisoner?" I asked Sola. She ignored me. "Where are they taking her? Is there, like, a *jail* here? Is it a *sturdy* jail?"

I tried to open my mind up to catch any telepathic reaction Sola might have had to my questions—which, I realized, had *not* come out as stealthily as I meant them to—but got nothing. If I was going to have any hope of pulling off a damsel rescue, I was going to have to figure out how to communicate at least a little.

First up, however, was more weapons training. Our plans to leave the city had been postponed due to the surface-to-airship warfare, and the daily grind was to continue among the ruins. Also, I had graduated from newborn sword training into a toddler class with the five-year-olds (who were all considerably larger than me). Sola presented me with a leather and metal harness thing designed for a full-sized Martian warrior that she had modified to fit what she thought my frame was—which meant of course

that it was still WAY too big. Thanks to the reduced gravity and my bulging Mars muscles, it wasn't particularly heavy, but it was unwieldy as shit.

It had a *cape*, though. So that was sort of rad.

The day's workshop mostly consisted of learning to use the huge Martian rifles, which was essentially like trying to aim with a fucking pole vaulting stick. I didn't really care about that, though. The *real* training today was going to be in MIND READING. And I found that my fellow students were the perfect age for language study—they seemed pretty intimidated by me, so they obligingly let me stare into their eyes and pick thoughts directly out of their brains. Which, by the way, were crazy boring. It was mostly drek about how they would bring glory to the clan, prove their worth to the clan, and murder various things.

But more importantly, I learned that when they spoke to *each other*, a kind of telepathic link opened up between them, and by focusing on the mental space *between them*, I was able to listen in. This is how I learned that one grunted syllable might mean "shut up," and the returning one, "no, YOU shut up." Then a third student would grunt something just as brief, but the accompanying thought was a whole question about whether murdering some specific thing, or *not* murdering it, would bring more glory to the clan.

I also learned that this particular clan of green Martians was called "Thark" (or the city they were from was called Thark? At any rate, they referred themselves as Tharks). And the Martian word for Mars itself was "Barsoom."

Armed with my new psychic powers, I found the conversation at dinner that night to be positively *scintillating*.

Sola, Sparky, Toto, and I had been sharing our flat with four or five other Martian women and a couple of other newborns, and the custom was for them all to grunt a few words to each other stoically while they ate. But now that I knew each syllable could contain whole sentences, and how to decipher them, an entire world opened up before me.

The eldest of the women, I discovered, was called Sarkoja, and the others treated her deferentially. After starting on a second round of milk, one of the others (whose name I never did learn) muttered something monosyllabic at her. I concentrated on their mental link and read the accompanying thought with perfect clarity.

"When will we enjoy the death throes of the red one?" she asked. "Or does Lorquas Ptomel intend on holding her for ransom?"

Yes! I mean, not yes that there were going to be death throes. But this was exactly the sort of information I had spent the afternoon reading the greasy thoughts of sweaty adolescents in hopes of obtaining.

"They have decided to carry her with us back to Thark, and exhibit her last agonies at the great games before Tal Hajus," Sarkoja replied.

Now Sola spoke up. "What will be the manner of her going out? She is very small and very beautiful—I had hoped that they would hold her for ransom."

Like, hold her for ransom because that way they wouldn't be able to kill her? Or hopefully even treat her badly? I was beginning to hope that Sola might be on my side here. The other women, though, reacted to her tone with disgust.

"It is sad, Sola, that you were not born a million years ago," Sarkoja sneered. "When all the hollows of the land were filled with water, and the peoples were as soft as the stuff they sailed upon." Wow, Sarkoja, *sick burn*. "We have progressed to a point where such sentiments mark weakness. It will not be well for you to permit Tars Tarkas to learn that you hold such degenerate sentiments."

Sola didn't back down one bit. "I see nothing wrong with my expression of interest in this red woman," she said. "She has never harmed us, nor would she should we have fallen into her hands. It is only the *men* of her kind who war upon us."

Holy shit—was Sola a *feminist*? Were there *feminist* giant green Martians in this hundred-year-old book? That wasn't what I'd been expecting.

Sola was just getting started. "And as for those men, I have ever thought that their attitude toward us is but the reflection of ours toward them. They live at peace with all their fellows, except when duty calls upon them to make war. We are at peace with none, forever warring among our own kind as well as upon them. Even in our own communities, the individuals fight amongst themselves."

Okay, *now* I was starting to get it. This was a diatribe about how civilized people—copper red on this planet, but I feel like probably lily white back on Earth—were all noble and honorable, and *their* wars were super important and whatever. Meanwhile, the heathen savages (see, it's

clever because in this story they're *green*!) were barbarians who brought all the genocide and smallpox blankets and whatnot upon themselves. *Ugh*. The worst thing about voyaging through goddamn literature was that you had to deal with one level of whatever stupid bullshit was happening to you, and then an entire other level of what the author was trying to *say* with the stupid bullshit. It somehow made the entire business twice as exhausting.

Still, from inside the thing, the way the green Martians' society was written was fucked up as all hell, and it was a relief to have someone else there who saw that.

"It is one continual, awful period of bloodshed from the time we break the shell until we gladly embrace the bosom of the river of mystery," Sola continued, as if to underscore my point. "The dark and ancient Iss carries us to an unknown—but at least no more frightful and terrible—existence. Fortunate indeed is he who meets his end in an early death."

As far as Sarkoja's barely veiled threat went, Sola wasn't having any of that, either. "Say what you please to Tars Tarkas," she said evenly. "He can mete out no worse fate to me than a continuation of the horrible existence we are forced to lead in this life."

That woman could pack some eloquence and fucking passion into a couple of syllables and an *inflection*, I'll tell you what. Also, I realized how lucky I had been to be put in her care, rather than someone like Sarkoja. Sola's outburst seemed to shock the others into silence, because they huffed and scoffed a bit, and then let the conversation drop, leaving the table to turn in early.

Sola went about cleaning up the remains of the meal with her usual, stoic bearing (Martians didn't use plates, so "clean up" consisted of wrapping the whole mess up in the tablecloth and tossing the bundle out into the streets), but now I was staring at her with little love-hearts in my eyes. The politics of her existence may have sucked ass, but Sola herself was fucking *rad*.

It was then that I decided to take her into my confidence as soon as we could be alone, tell her my half-assed plan to rescue the prisoner, and straight-up ask her to help.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAMPION AND CHIEF.

I got my chance the following morning after the other women left—or, at least, I *thought* I did. Even though I seemed to have mastered the art of picking up other people's telepathic conversations, I was still crap at transmitting my own.

Which meant that communicating with Sola was still a GIANT pain in the ass. Without the ability to augment my words with telepathy, I was stuck using the rudimentary *spoken* Martian language, which I had picked up almost none of so far. To learn a specific word, I had to get Sola to use it in a sentence, and then read her telepathic thoughts to verify what it meant while she was speaking it. This made for the longest and stupidest game of charades ever. But by the time I gave up trying to learn the word for "rescue," I had at least mastered the pronunciation of "treason," "torturing offense," and "punishable by death."

At that point, Sparky was running around screaming "ARABELLA TREASON" and "ARABELLA PUNISHABLE BY DEATH" at the top of his brain, so that wasn't great. Also, the conversation earned me a lecture about not trying to leave the city, lest I be torn to pieces by my ferocious watch dog, Toto. (I also learned that Toto's actual name was "Woola," but whatever. I'd made my choice.)

"His nature is such that he will bring you back into the city dead or alive if you persist on opposing him," Sola warned me. "*Preferably* dead."

That part, at least, was good for a chuckle. I was pretty sure that Toto and I had truly bonded since his first attempt to keep me from leaving town. I realized that I'd better test this theory, though. If I was going to make a hasty exit with a naked supermodel in tow, the last thing I needed to deal with was Toto losing his shit again when we hit the city limits.

The Martians seemed confident in Toto's ability to rein me in, at any rate, since they were happy to leave me to my own devices as long as I had him watching over me. I took him out for a stroll, and made a beeline for

the edge of town. As we approached the boundary line, Toto was definitely getting anxious. In fact, he ran ahead of me and pushed against my legs with his body. His expression was pleading rather than vicious, though. I realized that he wasn't trying to keep me captive.

He was afraid I would leave without him.

"Oh, Toto. *Of course* you can come." I tackled him in a big hug, and he rolled over onto his back, exposing his giant, stinky belly for pets. It was *the cutest*. After a good, solid ten minutes of cuddles, snuggles, and love, we wandered out into the desert together to explore.

The desert, BT-dubs, was dry and pointless and shitty, plus surrounded by mountains that I REALLY didn't look forward to escaping through when the time came. Also, I realized that if the Martians spotted me out there with my dog, they'd *probably* execute him for dereliction of duty or some bullshit, so we headed back pretty quick. I decided I'd better pretend the ferocious beast was still keeping a tight leash on me until we were ready to leave for good.

When we returned to the plaza, a crowd was gathering. I caught a glimpse of the prisoner standing between a pair of guards in front of the office building where I had been introduced to the chief a few days earlier. Her eyes met mine, and she gave me a look of *spectacular loathing*. I mean, this girl's bitchface was ON POINT. It might have been the best thing I had ever seen in my *entire life*.

She turned her back on me in a huff, just as her guards brushed her aside for the Martian chief himself, Lorquas Ptomel. He entered the building with a contingent of sub-chiefs and various hangers-on, and motioned for the prisoner to be escorted in behind him. I had no idea what was about to happen, but I figured I'd better find out. Any chance they'd let me just waltz in there to watch?

Nobody stopped me. To be honest, I was utterly baffled by my place in this community, which appeared to swing back and forth between common prisoner and... *ambassador of jumping*? For now, though, I wasn't complaining. The chief did spot me as I entered, and muttered something to Tars Tarkas, grinning. They were either out of telepathy range or just good at hiding their thoughts, though, because I didn't get any of it.

I did notice, though, that one of the prisoner's guards was Sarkoja, the Martian woman who had been all shitty to Sola at dinner the previous night.

She poked and prodded her charge with particular glee (the other guard, for her part, appeared to give exactly zero shits one way or the other).

Lorquas Ptomel turned to the prisoner. "What is your name?"

"Dejah Thoris," she replied evenly. "Daughter of Mors Kajak of Helium." *Dejah Thoris*. That name sounded vaguely familiar.

"And the nature of your expedition?"

"It was a purely scientific research party sent out by my father's father, the jeddak of Helium, to rechart the air currents, and to take atmospheric density tests." She used the same spoken language as the green Martians (consisting of a few, brief words, spoken with significantly less grunting). Which meant that my understanding was coming entirely from the telepathic portion. And on a side note, the prisoner's city was called "Helium"? *Really*? Well, I guess that explained the blimps.

"We were unprepared for battle," she continued, "as we were on a peaceful mission. The work we were doing was as much in your interests as in ours, for you know full well that were it not for our labors and the fruits of our scientific operations, there would not be enough air or water on Mars to support a single Martian life."

It quickly became clear to me that the author of this thing was being paid by the *fucking word*, because *holy balls* could this woman speechify. She talked about how her people maintained the air and water supply for the entire planet, and chastised the green Martians on their savage ways at considerable length. At one point, she veered off on a brief anti-communist tirade? It went on and on, but her monologue finally ended in a plea for cooperation.

"Come back to the ways of our common ancestors, back to the light of kindliness and fellowship. Together we may do still more to regenerate our dying planet. The granddaughter of the greatest and mightiest of the red jeddaks has asked you. Will you come?"

Lorquas Ptomel and his entire court just stared at her. For, like, a full minute. Finally Tars Tarkas rose to speak, and from the look on his face, I almost thought he was going to take her up on her offer. Before he had the chance, though, a young warrior leapt from the crowd and smacked Dejah Thoris across the face, knocking her to the floor. He placed his massive foot over her fallen torso, and opened his twisted, grinning mouth to laugh.

Before he could, though, I hit him with a flying leap and punched him in the face.

It's remarkable how little time you have to spend with superpowers before immediate violence becomes your go-to solution when presented with assholes. Nevertheless, I didn't worry for a moment that I might be making a bad call. The Martian was young enough that he hadn't reached his full height yet—so, like, only *thirteen* feet tall—but brash as fuck, and I knew from training with his younger cousins that if he had decided to make a name for himself with a random attack on a stranger, he was hardly going to stop at *partial* murder.

My foe let out a screech and went for his sword, but before he managed to unsheathe it, I grabbed him by the tusk and tossed him across the room, where he hit the far wall and slumped to the floor. The truth was, after those gorilla monsters the other day, I wasn't even *slightly* afraid of these spindly green motherfuckers.

The prisoner—Dejah—was staring at me from the floor, her nose running red with blood. Aw, shit. I helped her over to a nearby bench, and offered her the corner of my cape to try to staunch the flow. Fortunately, the nosebleed turned out to be the extent of her injuries.

"Why did you do it?" she honked, her head raised, nose pinched, and blood soaking rapidly into my only clothes. "You, who refused me even in friendly recognition in the first hour of my peril! And now you risk your life to—"

"Okay, okay!" I mean, most of the words weren't actually spoken out loud, but with that bloody nose, I figured I'd better head her off before she really got going. "It's kind of a whole, big, long story, and even if I had the time to tell it right now, it barely makes sense anyway. Let's just say I'm a fellow prisoner, and a friend."

"A prisoner?" Her epic bitchface started to creep back into her expression. "How, then, do you explain that you wear the regalia of a Tharkian chieftain? What is your name? Where is your country?"

Tharkian chieftain? That was news to me. "Arabella," I said. "Of Calabasas, California. Uh, planet Earth. And I have no idea what the deal is with the regalia. They just gave me this stuff to wear, like, yesterday."

At this point, we were interrupted by a Martian warrior—they had all watched us in silence until now, which I thought was actually pretty weird. He was carrying a cape, harness, a big stack of weapons and some jewelry, which I realized with a shock were taken off of the now-naked and lifeless body of the guy I had just thrown.

"Holy shit, did I *kill* that guy? HOW? I didn't even hit him as hard as I did that one dude on the first..."

Day. Oh my God, I had killed that first guy I fought with too, and *that*'s where the cape and harness had come from. Apparently I had been offing motherfuckers left and right since I got here, without even knowing it. Which explains why they had let me do more or less as I pleased, other than just up and leaving. I was a *chieftain*.

Which meant that now I was—what? A *double chieftain*? Executive vice president? Martian laws were stupid.

As I was looking at the pile of dead Martian bondage gear and wondering if I even wanted to touch it, Tars Tarkas pushed his way through the crowd toward me with a group of underlings in tow. From what I had surmised, he was second in command of this outfit, but since I had no idea how chieftain-murder-algebra worked in this town, for all I knew I now outranked him. He was looking at me like I had grown a second head.

"You speak the tongue of Barsoom quite readily for one who was deaf and dumb to us a few short days ago," he said. "Where did you learn it, John Carter?"

My first thought was that he was fucking bonkers, because I had forgotten to even try to speak Barsoomian, and had been conversing with Dejah Thoris in plain English. But evidently this was the part of the story where people started to understand me, so I wasn't going to question it if it made my life easier. My second thought was "wait, what did he just call me?" Again, his thoughts said "Arabella," which was what I had JUST SAID my name was. But the actual words that came out of his mouth were

"John Carter."

Oh, shit—I *totally* knew what book this was. And there WAS a movie of it! Madeline had tried to get me to see it with her when we were like ten, because it had some guy from a football show that she liked. But I refused! Because it sounded *awful*! Plus, the title was so stupid—I teased her about it mercilessly. "How was JACK KRAMER?" "Isn't that what happened in JOHN BARBER?" "Look, it's JAMES CARVER!" It was my main joke for, like, the entire summer. Oh my God, when she said they went to Mars, I thought it was about *astronauts* or something. *Son of a bitch*, I should have been nicer to Madeline. If I had just seen the movie with her way back

when, I would at least have some clue what I was supposed to be doing in this ass-forsaken story.

Tars Tarkas was still staring at me, and I remembered that he had asked me a question about my language skills. "That's all Sola, man," I said. "She's an *amazing* teacher."

"She has done well," he answered. "But your education in other respects needs considerable polish. Do you know what your temerity would have cost you had you failed to kill either of the two chieftains whose metal you now wear?"

"Um, my life, I'm guessing?" Martian protocol was brutal, but it wasn't fucking rocket science.

"No," he said. And his voice was somber, not taunting or sneering in the least. "Only in the last extremity of self defense would any of us kill a prisoner. They are to be saved for... *other* purposes."

Ew.

"Only one thing can save you now," he continued. "Should you be considered by our mighty and most ferocious ruler, Tal Hajus, as worthy of his service, you may be taken into the community and become a full-fledged Tharkian. Until we reach home, you will be accorded the respect that your acts have earned you. But you must not forget that every chief who ranks you is responsible for your safe delivery to Thark."

He set his jaw. "I am done."

"Okay, fine," I said before he could turn his back to walk away. "But if I'm a chieftain now, or whatever, here's *my* decree." I had no idea if I was allowed to make decrees, but I felt like I had to try *something*. "Nobody touches Dejah Thoris. She's under my protection, and if anyone tries to mess with her before we get to Thark, I'ma collect me some more capes and shit."

I was worried that the threat might be pushing it, but the Martians *ate it up with a spoon*. If anything, they treated me with even *more* respect for talking like an asshole. I helped Dejah Thoris to her feet—her nose seemed to have dried up—and escorted her from the throne room, with Toto bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER IX.

WITH DEJAH THORIS.

As we stepped out of the throne room, the two Martian women who had been guarding the princess hurried up to us, clearly planning to take her back into custody.

Nope.

"She's with me now," I said. Sarkoja looked like she wanted to chew my face off, and I remembered the particular pleasure she had taken in manhandling her prisoner. "And if you so much as touch her again, I will end you. Got that?"

Her glare only intensified (somehow?), but she stood down. I regretted making the threat as soon as I heard it come out of my mouth, though. Sure, it sounded badass when some tiny fifteen-year-old girl said it, but to everyone else, I was a burly dude in a position of power *who just threatened to kill a woman*. Granted, that woman was twelve feet tall with four arms and *tusks*, but she had also just watched me basically take a guy's life with the flick of my wrist.

Ugh. The gender politics of this book were going to give me headaches, I could already tell.

Back at the house, I gave Sola a quick recap. "Um, I got murder-promoted and adopted a naked lady. So I guess she's staying with us now?" I paused. "Oh, and Sarkoja REALLY hates us. So I feel like we should maybe find a different place to live, where our new guest doesn't have to bunk with her old prison guard?"

I had completely stopped trying to speak in Martian—English seemed to work just as well, through some combination of telepathy and plot contrivance, so fuck it. Sola appeared to understand me just fine and took the news in stride.

"You are a great chieftain now, John Carter." Huh—I guess *everybody* was going to call me that now. "I must do your bidding, though I am glad to do it under any circumstances. The young man whose metal you carry was

a mighty warrior, who had won his way close to the ranks of Tars Tarkas, second to Lorquas Ptomel only. You are now eleventh in rank."

Well, it was good to know I only had to kill ten more people if I wanted to be chief of this place. Although to tell you the God's honest truth, I'd rather punch myself in the crotch than be king of the Tharks.

We went house hunting and managed to find a place in a pretty good neighborhood near the throne room that wasn't completely infested with giant gorillas. It was *way fancier* than the first building, too, with bedrooms and everything, designed for the human-sized people who originally built the city. In fact, it had old statues of them, and murals and stuff covering all the walls. I almost asked Dejah Thoris if it was nicer than the last place they'd put her, but I stopped when I realized I was asking her to *compare jail cells*.

Oh, hi, you're still a prisoner here, plus now you have to live with an overly muscled naked guy in his pleasure palace, you're cool with that, right?

Ugh times a million. "Sola, I need you to move in here with Dejah Thoris, and protect her the way that you've protected me. I'm gonna go live —" Actually, I had no idea what my options even were. "In the barracks, I guess? Or something?"

Sola nodded. "I go now to retrieve supplies from our previous residence," she said. "I trust you to stand guard over her until I return."

Once she left, Dejah Thoris turned to me with a faint smile. "And whereto, then, would your prisoner escape should you leave her, unless it was to follow you and crave your protection?"

Was she *fucking with me*? I honestly couldn't tell. She gave a little push on one of the ancient beds, which was suspended from the ceiling by chains.

"And to ask your pardon for the cruel thoughts she has harbored against you these past few days?"

OH MY GOD, *this was where it descended into porn*. "Yeah, you're right," I said. "I don't think either of us are escaping this place unless it's together. Hey! We should go check out the rest of this mansion! Right?"

If she was disappointed when I changed the subject away from SWEET MAKEOUTS, she didn't show it. And don't get me wrong—although I didn't traditionally swing in her direction (Martian hanging sex bed pun not intended), this was DEJAH FUCKING THORIS. There was *no doubt* in my

mind that any potential makeouts would be sweet. But there were levels *and levels* of fuckedupedness at play here.

The first was that she was operating under some *pretty* false pretenses, to say the least. When she looked at me, she saw some kind of rugged, chiseled ideal of the masculine form—my own tastes in men may have run a bit more on the quirky side (exhibit one: Peacoat Peter Zamora, exhibit two: *a tin robot in a children's book*), but I grasped the appeal. There was something extra skeevy, though, about tricking her into being attracted to *an underage girl* with the illusion of rock-hard abs.

And the second issue was that I still hadn't figured out if any of the people in these books were even *people*. Back in Oz, all my friends *felt* real. They appeared to have their own thoughts and emotions and fears and desires, even if they clearly chose to do things from time to time simply because that's how the book was written. Going with the flow hadn't generally resulted in an existential crisis, though, on account of *none of them wanted to bone me*.

But this—*this* was different. Forget the fact that she was literally my prisoner, and all the shitty implications of that dynamic. What was even worse was that some author *wrote her this way*. Unspeakably beautiful, completely under my power, and with no greater ambition than to be Sally Hemings to my *Thomas fucking Jefferson*. The more I thought about it, the grosser it all was.

The third issue, of course, was that I was fifteen, and even the thought of normal, non-dubious makeouts with *anyone* made me feel like my head was on fire and my insides had turned into grape jelly. So there was that, too. Lucky for me, the moment had passed, and our further conversation as we inspected the various artworks and architecture was virtually innuendofree.

"I heard your statement to the creature you call Tars Tarkas," Dejah said, "and I think I understand your position among these people. But what I cannot fathom is your statement that you are not of Barsoom."

"Yeah, that's kind of a whole thing."

Her eyes narrowed. "Tars Tarkas said you had only just learned our language. Yet all Barsoomians speak the same tongue, from the ice-clad south to the ice-clad north. Only in the valley of Dor, where the river Iss empties into the lost sea of Korus, is there supposed to be a different language spoken."

"Okay," I said. I had almost forgotten how much she liked to talk.

"Understand me, John Carter. Except in the legends of our ancestors, there is no record of a Barsoomian returning up the river Iss. Do not tell me you have thus returned. They would kill you anywhere upon the surface of Barsoom if that were true!"

Her eyes were filled with a weird light, and her voice was straight-up pleading. She grabbed my hoodie (from her perspective, I guess maybe my *chest hair*?) as if trying to wring a denial out of my very heart.

"Tell me it is not true!"

"Relax!" I said. "It's not true!" If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that I had never been to Martian heaven, or Martian hell, or whatever the fuck was on the shores of Korus in the valley of Dor at the end of the river Iss. "Okay, do you know what planets are? Like, Barsoom is, I think, the fourth one from the sun? I'm from Earth. It's the third."

"Of course I know the third planet—my people call it *Jasoom*. Why, every schoolboy knows the geography, the fauna and flora, and the history of that world almost as well as we know our own. Can we not see everything that takes place there? Is it not hanging there in the heavens in plain sight?"

It turned out that the Martians had some kind of television/telescope situation, where they could see everything that happened on any planet in, like, HDTV-quality. There were human-like people on a whole bunch of them, too. But the reason it never occurred to her that I might be from Earth is that I was properly naked, rather than being covered in ugly, off-putting *clothes* like a gross Jasoom person.

I swear to God, every SINGLE time I thought I'd figured out what kind of book I was in, something happened to convince me I was actually in the *porn parody* of that book instead.

I decided that trying to explain the Calabasas Mall and Voyages Through Literature was probably pushing it—if my suspicions were correct, her encyclopedic knowledge of Earth history would probably end somewhere around the 1920s, anyway. So I attempted to learn as much as I could about the customs of her people until Sola returned, with Sparky in tow and several armfuls of furs and supplies.

She looked concerned. "Did you have a visitor in my absence? I passed Sarkoja descending the stairs on my way to this floor." Huh—apparently the old woman had been spying. That couldn't be good. There wasn't much

we could do about it at that point, though, except to keep an eye out in the future.

Dejah Thoris and I continued our tour of the house (which was massive, by the way), and she told me about the ancient civilization that had built it. Evidently there were three groups of regular people-Martians who eventually banded together for survival as the oceans receded and the planet slowly died. Ruins of once-great cities like this one were scattered all over the planet (most of them lousy with the ever-present giant white apes).

Of course, the way she told it took roughly *six hours*. I had long since zoned out when a messenger from Lorquas Ptomel arrived at our door and beckoned me to an immediate audience with the chief. I looked at Sola, who just shrugged. Toto got up to follow me as I left the building, but I ordered him to stay and guard the house.

If some kind of crazy shit was about to go down, I'd just as soon have him here, protecting Sola, Sparky, and Dejah Thoris. I had been more or less starved for companionship since I landed on this god-forsaken rock, and I wasn't about to let anything go sideways now that I was *finally* starting to make friends.

CHAPTER X.

A PRISONER WITH POWER.

Back in the throne room, I found Lorquas Ptomel and Tars Tarkas on the throne platform, waiting for me. They just kind of sat there staring, so I gave them what I'm confident was an absurd-looking salute. The chief signaled me to advance.

"You have been with us a few days," he said. "Yet during that time you have by your prowess won a high position among us. Be that as it may, you are not one of us. You owe us no allegiance."

That was good to know. "Your position is a peculiar one," he continued. "You are a prisoner, yet you give commands which must be obeyed. You are an alien, yet you are a Tharkian chieftain. You are a midget, and yet you can kill a mighty warrior with one blow of your fist." I didn't tell him that on Jasoom we didn't really use that word anymore—partly because I wasn't sure where all this was going, and partly because it probably wasn't even one of the top five most offensive things that had happened in this book so far.

"And now," he said, "you are reported to have been plotting to escape with another prisoner. A prisoner who, from her own admission, believes you are returned from the valley of Dor."

Fucking Sarkoja.

"Either one of these accusations would be sufficient grounds for execution. But we are a just people, and you shall have a trial on our return to Thark, if Tal Hajus so commands."

The whole thing was weirdly polite, but the look on his face told me he wasn't messing around. Also, I had pegged Ptomel for the main villain in this thing, but it seemed that he had an even bigger boss back at Rancho Thark. Lorquas Ptomel as merely a jed, whereas this Tal Hajus guy was *jeddak* of all Tharks (you can tell it's a bigger deal, because it's like a jed and a dak *combined*).

"But," he continued, "if you run off with the red girl, it is I who shall have to account to Tal Hajus. It is I who shall have to face Tars Tarkas, and either demonstrate my right to command or surrender the metal from my dead carcass."

Tarkas just nodded, as if to say, "We're bros, me and him, but I'ma DEFINITELY kill him and get that promotion if he lets any prisoners escape."

And this was where Loquas Ptomel made himself perfectly clear. "I have no quarrel with Tars Tarkas," he said. "Together we rule over the greatest of the lesser communities among the Green Men. We do not wish to fight between ourselves, and so if you were dead I should be quite glad. But there are only two conditions under which you may be killed without orders from Tal Hajus: in self-defense, or if you make any attempt to escape."

He leaned toward me. "The safe delivery of the girl, granddaughter of the greatest of the red jeddaks, is of the utmost importance to me. As a matter of justice, I must warn you that we only await one of those two excuses for ridding ourselves of the complication that you represent. You may go."

Gulp. To be honest, though, I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be scared of these guys or not. I had tossed a couple of their underlings to death literally without even trying, but these two were, theoretically, ten or eleven ranks tougher. Also, I remembered that in addition to tusks and swords, they carried *guns*. Super jumping and punching skills didn't make a Martian action hero *bulletproof*, did they?

Tars Tarkas approached me as I left the chamber. "Where are your quarters, John Carter?"

He said it as if he hadn't *just* participated in a conversation about which exact circumstances would make it legal for him to kill me. In fact, his demeanor hadn't changed a bit since the first day we met—mildly curious, amused by how good I was at jumping, and *utterly* unconcerned that I might be able to kill him with a single punch. That last part was actually a little unnerving.

"Uh, I guess I'm kind of homeless right now."

He brought me across the plaza to a building right next to the one where Sola and Dejah had just moved in. "My quarters are on the first floor," he

said. "And the second floor also is fully occupied by warriors. But the third floor and above are vacant, so you may take your choice of these."

Sweet. That worked out remarkably well. "I understand that you have given up your woman to the red prisoner," he said. "You can fight well enough to do as you please, so that is your affair. But as a chieftain you should have those to serve you. You may select any or all the females from the retinues of the chieftains whose metal you wear."

Ew. "You know, I think I'm good." Wait. "Except I don't have any idea how to prepare food. Can you have somebody bring me cheese, and whatever my dog eats? Oh, and furs, for bedtime."

He stared at me blankly.

"What the hell, just send them all over." From what I knew of Martian society, women who served a dead chieftain would probably be shamed, ostracized, or made to fight to the fucking death if I didn't take them in. Plus, I'd surely treat them better than whatever other asshole they might end up with. So, as I aimlessly roamed the third floor of the building looking a decent bedroom, ten or fifteen women and children arrived carrying loads of weapons, silks, furs, jewels, cooking utensils, and food. At my direction, they dumped it all in the front hallway, and went back for a second load.

As I would later learn, these weren't the families of the previous chieftains, and they weren't really servants, either. They *definitely* weren't wives. Their relationship was actually kind of weird—if anything, they were basically *staff*. They took orders from their chieftain, but he was also responsible for making sure they had food and shelter, and for the education of the younger ones. I told them all to find nice rooms on the fourth and fifth floors, and to keep doing whatever it was that they usually did. But, you know, to take extra breaks and stuff.

The whole business-as-usual thing was vital, because I wanted Tars Tarkas to think I was making a go of this—that I was on board with the whole green Martian chieftain business. But from the way I had heard every single person in this nightmare town utter the words "Tal Hajus" with equal parts fear, loathing, and respect, it was clear that the head honcho back in Thark was the mega-elephant of asshole Martian bosses—exponentially worse than the miscellaneous bastards I had met so far. And as much as I had let myself get distracted playing house and learning history with Dejah Thoris, I had no intention of ever meeting that guy.

It was time to plot our escape.

CHAPTER XI.

LOVE-MAKING ON MARS.

I know, I know. Right off the bat, though, let me assure you that I did no actual love-making on Mars (or, not that I could *remember*, anyway—we'll get to that part later). I'm basically keeping the chapter titles from the original book in this thing, though, and the whole thing was just—*ugh*. Whatever. Just read it for yourself.

As far as plotting our escape, leaving the city was no longer a matter of simply wandering off into the desert, since I rarely found myself alone to wander. I was a *chieftain* now, and there was *chieftain shit* to do. Also, I had decided that I needed to make Sola a part of our escape as well, since she would DEFINITELY get blamed for letting us go, plus she *hated* it there. But whenever I managed to get her alone and brought up the possibility, she shut down the conversation by insisting that escape was impossible, and any attempt could only end in death.

As far as my staff went, they didn't seem like they'd be any help at all. They more or less tolerated me, but I got the distinct impression that they fell squarely into the "it would sure be a lot easier if we were allowed to kill you" camp.

We still hadn't resumed our trek toward Thark—evidently, the green Martians liked their chances against any theoretical airship retaliation better in the ruins of the old city than out in the open desert. I was trying to decide if we'd be better off making our escape from here, or waiting and trying to slip away once we were on the open road. Of course, if Dejah Thoris's people *did* send a revenge fleet, it would make for a hell of a diversion.

I didn't exactly have my fingers crossed, though. That's not the kind of thing you witness and then ever really want to see again.

All of which got me wondering about the nature of novel I was stuck in. It was certainly possible that it was all some big anti-war screed. Like, *war is hell, y'all! Look how awful! Never do wars!* I had my doubts, though—my guess was this thing wasn't marketed to the sober, adult crowd. In fact,

most of the people who read this kind of stuff were *probably* closer to my age, only with way more testosterone and fewer critical thinking skills.

And I think that was why the shitty gender dynamics, in particular, grated on me so much. Most kids figured out at some point that war sucked pretty bad. But when you're young, and stupid, and a *boy*, right around the age when hormones start flooding into your system, I'm not sure how many stories you can even *read* where the hero is given a gorgeous, docile sex kitten as a fucking *participation trophy* before that shit seeps into your subconscious and you start to think of it as a life goal. And don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to claim JEB CARBER, NAKED WAR GUY OF MARS as some kind of all-pervasive cultural touchstone. But that shit was *emblematic*.

My train of thought was interrupted by Tars Tarkas, who had come to fetch me for the day's combat training. Today's class? *Thoat riding*.

Thoats were those big, ten-legged monster horses that the warriors rode, and I now owned two of them. The Martians didn't use saddles or anything, so I wasn't super excited about my chances of staying on top of one. Tars Tarkas explained helpfully that if my steed failed to follow my telepathic commands with sufficient enthusiasm, I should hit it between the ears with the butt of my gun, and repeat this maneuver as necessary until the thing was either subdued, or had defeated me.

"In the latter case," he said, "it becomes a death struggle between man and beast. If you are quick enough with your pistol you might live to ride again, albeit upon some other beast."

"And if I'm not?"

"Then your torn and mangled body will be gathered up by your women and burned in accordance with Tharkian custom."

The way he said it almost made me laugh. It wasn't a threat at all, or even, like, a warning. It was as if he was *genuinely pleased to be helpful*. I was guessing Tars Tarkas didn't get enough *bro times* hanging around with Lorquas Ptomel, and yearned for manly camaraderie. Dude was in for a disappointment, though. I'd had remarkable success with Toto by treating him like a harmless puppy, and I decided that my equestrian style was going to be significantly less authoritarian than what he had described.

I approached one of the thoats slowly, looked it in the eye, and petted it gently on the nose. "Who's a beautiful horse?" (It was, for the record, a *spectacularly* ugly horse.) "You are! YOU'RE a beautiful horse!" It let me

come in closer for a hug, and after that it was all over. By the end of the day, both thoats were following me around like ducklings, and obeying each and every command with eager, loving attention. Tars Tarkas was absolutely *beside himself*.

"How have you bewitched them?" he demanded.

I had one arm deep between two of the animal's teeth, trying to free a stone that had gotten wedged in there when it was feeding on moss.

"Cuddles," I said. "Seriously, you should try it."

Apparently savage thoat rebellion was a major cause of death on the battlefield, yet somehow no one had ever tried being *nice* to them. He made me show him specifically how I petted the animals, and then sent for Lorquas Ptomel so I could repeat my demonstration for his boss. Soon, every warrior in the regiment was gently caressing and snuggling their mounts. It was *absolutely* the best thing I had yet to see on Mars.

I paid a visit to Sola and Dejah Thoris just before nightfall, and found them outside on the street beneath their residence (Toto was with them, but Sparky had been left to his own devices). Sola made a quick excuse to return home with the dog, leaving me alone with Dejah Thoris.

She was pleased to see me. "Sarkoja told Sola that you had become a true Thark," she said, "and that I would now see no more of you than any of the other warriors."

"Yeah, Sarkoja is pretty much full of shit," I said. She laughed—it was the first time I'd heard her do that, and I was a bit surprised at how relaxed and natural it sounded.

"Hey, maybe we should take a walk." The mention of Sarkoja reminded me that if we were going to discuss escape plans, we should probably do it as far as possible from prying ears. Nightfall came in its bizarrely rapid fashion as we wandered, and brought a cool breeze with it. Dejah Thoris made a small shiver.

"Uh, can I offer you a cape or something?" I had *two* of them on. Plus, despite appearances, I was still wearing my hoodie, so I was plenty warm.

"I suppose it will keep the chill off," she said. "Although I fear you mean to cover me up like one of your absurd Jasoomian women."

The thought *had* crossed my mind. I mean, she could dress (or not dress) however she wanted, but hanging out with naked people was weird. And the fact that we were taking an *intimate fucking stroll* certainly wasn't making it less so.

"So, uh, how are they treating you?"

Dejah sighed. "Cruelly, but only in small ways. Nothing that can harm me outside my pride. They know I am the daughter of ten thousand jeddaks, that I trace my ancestry straight back to the builder of the first great waterway. And they, who do not even know their own mothers, are jealous of me."

Dejah Thoris, it turned out, was a *little bit* stuck up—Madeline would freaking LOVE her.

"At their heart, they hate their horrid fates, and I stand for all they most crave and never can attain," she said. "Let us pity them, my chieftain, for even though we die at their hands, we can afford them pity, since we are greater than they, and they know it."

I didn't love the way she said "my chieftain." Something about her speech was so somber, though, and sad. I think she truly was resigned to the idea of dying among the green Martians. She looked at me with those freakishly soulful eyes, and I had absolutely no idea what to say to make her feel any better. Brainstorming an incredibly dangerous escape plan didn't feel like the right way to go in her fragile state. She looked like she just wanted to feel like someone was on her side.

"Well, uh, if those women keep messing with you, tell them they'll have Jack Carter to deal with." It felt like the most boring, dude-bro-ey thing that had ever escaped my lips.

She raised an eyebrow. "Jack Carter?"

Whoops. "Jeff Carter? No, John! John Carter, warlord of Mars." People had been calling me by that name for more than a day now, but I *really* rode the whole JOSH CRAMBOR joke into the ground for a whole summer, so it was still hard for me to keep track.

"You go by many names, my chieftain."

"Yeah, it's a Jasoom thing. They all start with J, though, at least."

"Then I shall call you J. Carter," Dejah Thoris said. "Warlord of Mars."

We continued our walk, and Dejah's mood seemed much improved. Apparently in this instance, as in EVERY OTHER SITUATION IN THIS BOOK, toxic masculinity was indeed the solution. We talked on, and she hung on my every word, but also made fun of me mercilessly, particularly for my tendencies toward kindness.

"I presume that should you accidentally wound an enemy you would take him home and nurse him back to health," she laughed. "Absolutely," I said "I *love* nursing enemies. It's, like, my whole schtick."

The silk cape over her shoulders slipped, and as I put my hand on her shoulder to keep it from sliding, she leaned forward. Now the thing fell open *completely* in the front.

"Though I spend every hour of the day in an underground pit," she said, "mixing their awful explosive powder, when I am with you every sorrow melts away."

Explosive powder? "Wait, what explosive powder?"

"Explosive *like the feeling in my breast*," she said. "Like my affections for the man I discovered, against all odds, in my darkest hour, when—"

"No, for reals," I said. "Tell me about the powder."

Part of me was desperate to change the subject, because I was *seriously* beginning to reevaluate my stance on gorgeous sex kitten participation trophies. Which was kind of freaking me out. Also, though, the fact that she had access to explosives seemed like it might be important to our escape plans.

She sighed. "It's the radium powder they use to make their terrible projectiles. It must be manufactured by artificial light—you have noticed that their bullets explode when they strike an object?" I had not, but it did explain the massive hole in the wall after I stopped that guy from shooting Toto.

"Well, the opaque outer coating is broken by the impact, exposing the powder. The moment sunlight strikes it, this powder explodes with a violence nothing can withstand. If you ever witness a night battle, you will note the absence of these explosions, while the following morning will be filled at sunrise with the sharp detonations of exploding missiles fired the night before."

She attempted to turn the conversation back toward romance, but to be honest, my mind was going a mile a minute, and I was happy to follow it there. I still didn't have a working escape plan figured out, but I did know one thing for sure:

It was going to involve blowing some shit up.

CHAPTER XII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

Dejah Thoris drew my cape from her shoulders and held it out to me. Without a word, and with her head held high, she turned and headed toward the plaza, and the doorway of her quarters. I followed just long enough to make sure she reached the building safely, and when I saw Toto waddle out to greet her, I entered my own house.

I was going to let her sulk for a while. Moonlit, romantic walks aside, everything that was wrong with this entire setup was still hanging there between us. The blind panic that overtook me whenever things got at all intimate with Dejah was definitely part of the fortress-like emotional defenses I'd been constructing since grade school. Still, I trusted it a lot more than I trusted that *other* part of my subconscious. The part that was all like, *smooches? I couldn't possibly—YES*, *PLEASE*, *ALL THE SMOOCHES*.

Also, I was beginning to discover that I had ZERO natural affinity for plan concocting, and if we were ever going to actually leave this place, I needed some time to work things through. (Also a shower. *Jesus*, I needed a cold shower right about then. I would have given both my capes, all my cooking utensils, and a mountain of flavorless cheese for RUNNING WATER.)

With nothing else to do, I did my best to tamp down the stupid teenage hormone-feelings, sat cross-legged on the floor and *plotted*. I had questioned more than once whether the people I met in these books truly had free will. But from the way I kept deciding to escape, only to get caught up it whatever bullshit was going on at camp that day and never making any progress toward it, I was beginning to wonder if *I* had any. And *that* pissed me off.

The plan I came up with wasn't brilliant, but at least it was *something*. If I could figure out where they stored the explosives—or possibly even get Dejah to smuggle some out of work the next day (while... naked? That part

might need some work)—we could take another midnight stroll and hide batches of it all over town. Then when daylight broke, all hell would break with it, and the resulting chaos would hopefully be enough to allow us to haul ass on my thoats and be long gone before anybody thought to look for us. All I needed was a day—maybe two—to convince Sola and Dejah Thoris that this was our best shot.

I never got it, though, as I awoke the following morning to an unexpected racket, and went outside to discover that my entire plan had been shot straight to hell—the Martians were harnessing up mega-elephants and packing up chariots.

We were heading out for Thark.

I sought out Dejah Thoris in the throng of departing chariots, and found her with Sola, Sparky, and Toto. She was still sulking from the night before, and refused to even speak to me. She was also *chained to her seat*.

"Sola!" I said, gesturing to the chains. "What the fuck?"

Sola gave me a look of dejected exasperation. It was clear that she had already had this fight. "Sarkoja thought it best," she said. "She herself wears the key."

Fucking Sarkoja! I spotted Tars Tarkas across the plaza, and headed over to make my objections known. With my super strength and all, it was possible I could just bust the chains myself, but I didn't want to cause a whole big ruckus by testing it now, or wait until the last minute, only to find out I was shit out of luck.

Tars Tarkas, though, was having none of it. "John Carter," he said, "if ever you and Dejah Thoris escape the Tharks, it will be upon this journey. We know that you will not go without her, so we hold you both in the easiest way that will yet ensure security."

Ugh. I couldn't argue with his logic, though. "Fine. But we're bros, right? At least do me a solid give the key to someone besides *Sarkoja*." I wasn't sure if I would be able to modify the whole explosion plan for use on the open road, but I was confident that staying as far away from Sarkoja as possible while we figured it out would be ideal.

"We have no such things as 'bros' on Barsoom, John Carter. But have your will. I shall direct that Sarkoja cease to annoy the girl, and take custody of the key myself."

"Thanks," I said. Of all the Martian warriors I'd met, he really did seem like an okay guy. "Unless you want to delegate that last part to me, of

course."

He looked at me long and earnestly before he spoke.

"Were you to give me your word that neither you nor Dejah Thoris would attempt to escape until after we have safely reached the court of Tal Hajus, you might have the key, and throw the chains into the river Iss."

Holy shit. *That* would certainly make sneaking off in the dead of night easier. Something about Tars Tarkas's earnestness made me pause, though. They might not have a *word* for 'bros' on Mars, but I was pretty sure we had some kind of a thing between us. His friendship was a weird, continually surprising thing, and at that moment, I wasn't prepared to mess with it.

"Naw, keep it. I was just kidding, anyway." He smiled, and said no more.

On my way back to the chariot, I passed Sarkoja, and the venomous look she shot at me was absolutely *delicious*. She was huddled with a big, hulking warrior named Zad. I recognized him from thoat lessons the previous day—the whole experiment with kindness to animals had not come *at all* naturally to him. He only had one name because he hadn't killed any chieftains to earn a second one yet. (I, on the other hand, had a couple of extra names I didn't need or want. Some of the warriors did call me Dotar Sojat, because it was a combination of the chieftains whose metal I wore, and because they evidently agreed with me that JOM CLOMBER sounded ridiculous.)

Sarkoja and Zad kept casting occasional glances at me, and arguing heatedly in quiet tones. So that definitely wasn't going to end well.

Since I had a pair of thoats to my name now, (the mega-elephants, I was sad to discover, were community property), I was part of the advance guard that travelled ahead of the chariots. I spent the day riding alone, with Toto trotting casually at my side. It was dreary as balls.

Shortly before sunset, we finally broke and made camp. By the time I found Sola and Dejah, Tars Tarkas had already come by and unlocked the chains. Aww. Dejah, however, still wanted nothing to do with me. She stormed off with Toto to secure a sleeping area without so much as acknowledging my existence.

I turned to Sola. "What's the deal with *that*? Did she say anything to you?"

Sola looked as confused by the whole thing as I was. Or more so, considering that she didn't know that I had basically rebuffed her naked, capeless advances on the street the previous night.

"She says that you have angered her, and that is all she will say. Except that she is the daughter of a jed and the granddaughter of a jeddak, and she has been humiliated by a creature who could not polish the teeth of her grandmother's *sorak*."

Sola must have read my thoughts, or just picked up on my frown. "It's a little animal about as big as my hand," she said helpfully. "Red Martian women keep them to play with."

"Yeah, I got that from context." If Dejah wanted to give me the cold shoulder because I refused to *take advantage of her slavery* while I figured out how to *literally save her life*, then FINE. The whole thing was stupid anyway. It reminded me of high school. And it made the thought of escape seem that much more urgent. One of these fucking mega-elephants had to be hauling a load of highly explosive powder that would kill us all if it were exposed to the tiniest bit of sunlight, right? How well could *that* possibly be guarded?

You know what? Maybe I was overthinking this. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Sola, let's just *leave*. Tonight. Dejah is unchained, and Tharks sleep like the fucking *dead*. We'll take my thoats under cover of darkness, or whatever, and just *go*."

"This plan is not feasible, John Carter. Our finest marksmen will be posted on watch. Your departure would not go unnoticed."

"Then we'll *take care of* the watchmen," I said. "Quietly, like ninjas." I wasn't entirely sure I could incapacitate a Martian warrior non-lethally, especially with *my* track record. At that point, though, I also wasn't sure how much I even *cared*. "I'm DONE, Sola. *I don't want to fucking do this any more*."

Sola leaned down, put two of her hands on either side of my face, and looked directly into my eyes. I don't know if she was ensuring that our telepathic connection was as clear as possible, or just engaging in a rare moment of intimacy, but the effect was the same.

"I would not blame you if you left this night. As much as Lorquas Ptomel speaks of a fair trial in Thark, I believe in my heart that Tal Hajus will never suffer you to live. And the fate of Dejah Thoris is set in stone. Any risk you might take in escaping while we travel, no matter how severe, would be well-taken. However, I cannot accompany you on this journey. You must take the red girl and go alone. There is no life for me outside the clan."

"You fucking *hate it* here. Just come with us! Whatever's out there, it can't be any worse than *this*."

"Barsoom is not a mystery to me, John Carter, as it is to you. I know very well what we will find outside this camp, and I can assure you it is barren, inhospitable wasteland. The peoples of Barsoom do not band together for companionship. They do it for *survival*."

"Then Dejah Thoris's people—"

"The red men may well embrace you as one of their own, but there is no place among them for me. Of this you may be certain."

"Sola, I—"

"When I take my leave of the clan, John Carter, it will be down the sacred waters of the river Iss. This has always been my fate, and it is not pride, or faith in our ancient ways that binds me to it. It is *necessity*."

Her hands fell from my face. "Farewell, John Carter. When I behold you, I see not Barsoom as it is, but Barsoom as I wish it could be. May the two moons always light your way. For if there is any man who can build such a world, certainly it is you."

For once, I had no snarky rejoinder. Sola want back to unpacking her bed things from the chariot, and I wandered off in a daze. Any thought of escaping that night was gone. Because the truth was, as much as I felt I needed to save Dejah Thoris from whatever bullshit was going to happen in Thark, I wanted to rescue Sola *even more*.

I slept fitfully, and when the harsh Martian sunrise finally came, I loaded my thoats in silence and rode out with the rest of them. After about an hour, we came to an incubator. At first I thought we were just checking in on a batch of eggs, but, no. These were the offspring of a *different* clan. They were pretty small, too—Martian eggs took a good five years to hatch, and judging by their size, these had been out in the sun for maybe six months.

Lorquas Ptomel ordered his warriors to break open the incubator walls and hack the living shit out of the eggs with their swords.

FUUUUUUUUUUK THIS BOOK. Fuck every goddamn chapter, paragraph, and run-on sentence. What if I just fucking *left*? What if I rode off into the desert and died of exposure? What if *I* journeyed to my final

repose down the motherfucking river Iss? Would *that* satisfy the requirements of this shitty-ass voyage through literature? I had been operating under the assumption that I had to finish the plot to get out of here, but *who even knew*?

Uuuuuuuuuuugh. I had nothing but compassion for Sola, because I had only been on this planet for a week, and I already felt hopelessly trapped.

I overheard Tars Tarkas saying that the incubator belonged to a clan called Warhoon, which they had some kind of stupid, savage, high school warrior rivalry with or some shit. He estimated that the Warhoons were only a day's march ahead, and seemed almost giddy at the prospect of battle. That was it, then. That would be my diversion. Now all I had to do was convince two bull-headed Martian women to let me rescue them, and I'd be all set.

We rode on, and sometime around early afternoon took a short break for milk and cheese. I was switching my gear from one thoat to the other—I hadn't officially named them, but had started thinking of them as "Rainbow Dash" and "Twilight Sparkle," even though I couldn't technically tell them apart. And I doubted that they even noticed the weight of me or my stuff, but it felt fair to split the work between them, regardless.

Zad, that Thark warrior who I'd seen chatting with Sarkoja the previous day, strolled right up and *stabbed Twilight Sparkle with his sword*.

"DUDE! WHAT THE FUCK?!" He just stood there, weapon raised, muscles flexed. This was an *official challenge*, I realized. And I had half a mind to pull out my Martian pistol and shoot the son of a bitch where he stood, but they had this whole rule about only meeting a challenger with a weapon equal or lesser than the one he attacked you with. So I turned to my weapon pile and selected the pointy thing that matched the size and shape of his—I had never bothered to memorize the whole hierarchy of fucksticks (there were like three different size swords, and axes and daggers and a whole bunch of other stuff). I mean, I knew *for sure* I was allowed to kill him with my bare hands, but the truth was, I had kind of suckerpunched those other two chieftains. This guy was READY FOR ME, and he was clearly NOT FUCKING AROUND.

What sucked for him, though, is that I wasn't either. "You want to fucking DO THIS?" I said. "FINE! Let's *DO THIS*!" The entire Thark community gathered around us in a big circle, and my opponent charged.

Every ounce of bravado was flushed out of my system *immediately*. Holy *shit*! I was in a *sword fight*! With a fifteen-foot tall, four-armed, tusked, horse-stabbing *asshole*. All my violence in this book so far had been the kind where I got pissed, lashed out, and accidentally ended things with a single blow. My current situation, in contrast, was *terrifying*. I let out a scream and jumped out of his way.

Somehow, he managed to get himself nicked by my blade as I cleared him, and the crowd went wild. He charged again and again, and I kept dodging, but he caught the tip of my sword every single time. He was bleeding from half a dozen little cuts, and I was convinced that the minor wounds must have been scripted into the fight like some kind of WWE bout. I certainly wasn't cutting him on purpose.

My opponent switched tactics and tried going with flashy swordsmanship instead of blind rage, but only managed to strike my sword rather than my flesh. Now I was sure of it—no matter how pathetically I flailed my weapon about, he went out of his way to smack his sword against mine, completely ignoring the huge opening I was certainly leaving him to run me straight through. The crowd was eating it up with a spoon.

At first I thought Zad was fucking with me, or genuinely putting on a show. But his face was a mask of rage and frustration, and his body language was a hundred percent murder. *This was the book's doing*. The fact that I was a master swordsman who could easily defeat this savage warrior was *part of the plot*.

I almost felt sorry for the poor, brutal son of a bitch. But mostly I just felt bored, because that shit went on *forever*. I was sure the book wanted me to find my own opening and put my enemy down, but you know what? Fuck the book. My sword felt as light as cardboard, and I wasn't getting winded at all. I could do this all day. So as far as I was concerned, he could either give up, or keep attacking me until he collapsed from exhaustion like —who's that one guy? From the movie my mom likes? With the fifty eggs. Am I the only one who ever saw that movie?

Anyway, after—I don't know, thirty minutes, maybe? Six hours? Some ABSURD length of time to stand there and *fight a guy with swords*—he evidently realized he was tiring MUCH faster that I was, and decided to go out in some final blaze of glory. I hoped this would take the fight out of him and we could finally end the charade. Just as he rushed me, however, a flash of light struck me in the eyes.

Oh, *shit*. I leapt blindly out of his way, but was only partially successful, as a sharp pain cut into my left shoulder. *Shit*, *shit*, *shit*! I stumbled to my feet squinting, desperately trying to get eyes on my opponent. Instead, though, I saw something unexpected among the crowd that surrounded us.

Three figures were standing high on a chariot, apparently to see the action over the heads of the other Martians. It was Sola, Dejah Thoris and Sarkoja, and Sarkoja was holding a small, flashing mirror in one of her hands. *Fucking Sarkoja*. Just as my gaze rested on them, Dejah Thoris struck the green Martian's arm, knocking the mirror away. Sarkoja screeched in rage, drew a wicked looking dagger—

And plunged it right into the chest of Sola, who had thrown herself between the two them.

"Noooooooo!" I started toward them, but Zad was there, his sword crashing into mine. "Goddamnit, get out of my way!" He grinned ghoulishly and continued his attack. "I SWEAR TO FUCK, if you don't back the hell off, I will—"

Now, though, it was *my* turn to be plot-blocked. Suddenly I felt the sharp point of his sword at my breast in a thrust I could neither parry nor escape. *This was it*. This was how it was going to end. Whether it meant waking up back at the mall in Calabasas, or shuffling off this mortal coil once and forever, this was the shitty way that the shitty story turned out.

Then I remembered that when a Martian warrior killed a chieftain, *he got to take his pick of the women*.

I threw myself *into* his attack, felt his blade slide into me and find sunlight through my back, and chopped that motherfucker's head clean off. My knees gave out beneath me, my head whirled in dizziness, and I tasted blood as everything around me went black.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOLA TELLS ME HER STORY.

I was still on the battlefield when I regained consciousness. People were cheering like crazy. *I had a fucking sword stuck through me*. Jesus CHRIST. Was this thing not over *yet*?

Evidently, I had only been unconscious for a moment. And Zad's weapon had somehow *missed all my vital organs*? I'll tell you what, it hurt like a BITCH, though. I hobbled through the screaming masses toward Sola's chariot, and found her just as living as I was, getting bandaged up by some of the women on my staff. Sarkoja's blade had struck the edge of a piece of metal jewelry, resulting in a flesh wound far less serious than my own.

I cleared my throat, and the women with the bandages begrudgingly turned their attention to me. Fortunately, with the non-stop warfare that makes up their day-to-day existence, Martian health care is THE FUCKING BOMB. Thanks to various moss-based healing agents and mad bandage skills, only the most instantaneous death blows ever actually killed anybody on this planet. They had me patched up and—other than extreme wooziness due to loss of blood and some mild, stabbing pain where the actual sword had run me through—good as new in no time.

I stumbled off and found Sola, standing guard over Dejah Thoris, who was lying in her silks and furs, sobbing. "Shit," I said. "Is she okay? Was she hurt?"

"No," Sola answered evenly, "she thinks you are dead."

Aww. "And now her grandmother's cat has no one to polish its teeth?" I meant the remark to announce my presence, but Dejah was too far gone to even notice I was there.

"I do not understand either her ways or yours," Sola said. "But I am sure the granddaughter of ten thousand jeddaks would never grieve like this over any who held but the highest claim on her affections."

"No, I get it," I said. "I was just trying to lighten the mood."

"Tears are a strange sight upon Barsoom," Sola continued. "I have only seen but two people weep in all my life, other than Dejah Thoris—one from sorrow, and the other from baffled rage. The first was my mother, years ago, before they killed her. And the other was Sarkoja when they dragged her away from me today."

Baffled rage tears sounded good to me, as far as Sarkoja was concerned. But wait—did Sola say *her mother*?

"I thought you guys didn't even have parents. Do you mean, like, the woman who taught you baby sword fighting and junk?"

"I, alone among my people, knew my actual mother," she said. "And my father, also. If you would like to hear the strange and un-Barsoomian story, come to the chariot tonight, John Carter, and I will tell you that of which I have never spoken in all my life before."

"Oh, I'll be there," I said. A horn blasted, which was the call to resume our travels. I looked down at Dejah Thoris, who was still curled up in her furs, in tears.

"Uh, tell her I'm alive, okay?" I paused. "But don't tell her I saw her crying. If she wants to talk later, cool, but if she'd rather keep doing the cold shoulder thing, seriously, either way's fine."

We rode out. And, newsflash: thoat riding with a grievous sword wound *suuuuuucks*. (Twilight Sparkle was fine, by the way, thanks for asking. My helper Martians looked at me like I was an asshole when I told them to treat her sword wound the same way they treated mine, but they all pretty much loathed me regardless of what I did, so I didn't let it bug me.) Our massive caravan of a thousand Martians, two hundred fifty mega-elephants, something like seven hundred thoats and a shit-load of monster-dogs moved as quietly as ghosts across the mossy Barsoomian wastes. At night, we camped at the foot of some hills we had been approaching for two days, which had marked the water's edge way back when the plain behind us had been an ocean or whatever.

Apparently our animals got all the moisture they needed to survive by eating moss, but I was thirsty as hell, so I chugged a cask of acid milk (I had since learned that it came from plants, THANK GOD), and wandered out to find Sola. I found her sitting alone with Toto, a good distance from the rest of the camp.

"I am glad you came," she said. "Dejah Thoris sleeps, and I am lonely." There was a pile of furs by her feet, which presumably contained the

Martian princess, buried somewhere inside. "Now, I promised to tell you my story, or rather the story of my parents."

It was a good thing I brought my cheese dinner with me, because it turned out that this was going to take a while.

"My mother was rather small—in fact, too small to be allowed the responsibilities of maternity, as our chieftains breed principally for size. She was also less cold and cruel than most green Martian women, and caring little for their society, she often roamed the deserted avenues of Thark alone, or went and sat among the wildflowers that deck the nearby hills, thinking thoughts and wishing wishes which I believe I alone among Tharkian women today may understand.

"And there among the hills she met a young warrior, whose duty it was to guard the feeding zitidars"—zitidars were mega-elephants, I learned — "and thoats. They spoke at first only of such things that interest a community of Tharks, but gradually, as they came to meet more often, they talked about themselves, their likes, their ambitions and their hopes. She trusted him and told him of the awful repugnance she felt for the cruelties of their kind, for the hideous, loveless lives they must ever lead, and then she waited for the storm of denunciation to break from his cold, hard lips; but instead he took her in his arms and kissed her."

You go, Sola's mom.

"They kept their love a secret for six long years," she continued. "My mother was of the retinue of the great Tal Hajus, while her lover was a simple warrior, wearing only his own metal. Had their defection from the traditions of the Tharks been discovered, both would have paid the penalty in the great arena.

"The egg from which I came was hidden beneath a great glass vessel upon the highest and most inaccessible of the partially ruined towers of ancient Thark. Once each year, my mother visited it, for the five long years it lay there in the process of incubation—she dared not come oftener, for she feared that her every move was watched. During this period, my father gained great distinction as a warrior and had taken the metal from several chieftains. His love for my mother had never diminished, and his own ambition in life was to reach a point where he might wrest the metal from Tal Hajus himself, and thus, as ruler of the Tharks, be free to claim her as his own, as well as protect the child which otherwise would be quickly dispatched should the truth become known."

Okay, I had a pretty good guess who her Dad was already.

"It was a wild dream, that of wresting the metal from Tal Hajus in five short years, but his advance was rapid, and he soon stood high in the councils of Thark. But one day his dream was lost forever, for he was ordered away upon a long expedition to the ice-clad south, to make war upon the natives there.

"About a year after his departure, the egg hatched. Thereafter my mother continued to keep me in the old tower, visiting me nightly and lavishing upon me the love that community life would have robbed us both of. An expedition would soon be sent out to an incubator, and she hoped to mix me with the other young upon its return. She taught me rapidly the language and customs of my kind, and one night she told me the story I have told to you up to this point, impressing upon me the necessity for absolute secrecy and the great caution I must exercise. And then, drawing me close to her, she whispered in my ear the name of my father."

I was on the edge of my seat. Partly because her story was enthralling, and partly because this was by far the most Sola had said to me since I'd been on Mars. *Combined*. "And?"

"And then a light flashed out upon the darkness of the tower chamber, and there stood Sarkoja."

Fucking SARKOJA! Jesus!

"Her eyes were fixed in a frenzy of loathing and contempt upon my mother. That she had heard the entire story was apparent—she had suspected something wrong from my mother's long nightly absences, which accounted for her presence there on that fateful night. One thing she had not heard, however: the whispered name of my father."

The rest of her story was pretty grim. After Sarkoja ran off to narc, Sola's mom rushed to intercept the cavalcade that was returning with a crop of newly hatched babies that very night. She managed to hide Sola among them, unseen, and later reported that she had thrown the child to the white apes in order to save her from a fate worse than death.

"I never saw my mother after that night. She was imprisoned by Tal Hajus, and every effort, including the most horrible and shameful torture, was brought to bear upon her to wring from her lips the name of my father. But she remained steadfast and true.

"It was three years afterward that my father finally returned from his expedition and learned the story of my mother's fate—I was present as Tal

Hajus told him, but never by the quiver of a muscle did he betray the slightest emotion, although he did not laugh as Tal Hajus gleefully described her death struggles. I am awaiting the day when he shall win the goal of his ambition, and feel the carcass of Tal Hajus beneath his foot, for I am sure that he but waits the opportunity to wreak a terrible vengeance, and that his great love is as strong in his breast as when it first transfigured him nearly forty years ago."

"So, your Dad—does he *know* you survived?"

"He does not know me for what I am, nor does he know who betrayed my mother to Tal Hajus."

We sat in silence for a few moments. I mean, if she wanted to tell me who her dad was, she'd tell me, right? I wasn't going to push.

Finally, she spoke. "John Carter, if ever a real man walked the cold, dead bosom of Barsoom, you are one."

Ha! Shows you what *she* knew.

"I know that I can trust you, and because the knowledge may someday help you, or him, or Dejah Thoris, or myself, I am going to tell you the name of my father."

"It was Tars Tarkas, right? Was it Tars Tarkas?"

"My father's name is Tars Tarkas."

CHAPTER XIV.

WE PLAN ESCAPE.

FINALLY. I had been trying to figure out a way out of this giant Martian clown show for days, and motherfuck it, I was doing it NOW. And I was taking Sola with me, so help me. And Dejah Thoris, and Toto, and Sparky, I guess, if he wanted to come (I was actually fairly ambivalent about Sparky).

And when I say "NOW," of course, I mean that we made the entire journey with no progress toward escaping whatsoever, and didn't even really make an attempt until after we'd already reached Thark. Most of this was because Dejah Thoris had chosen to go with the "completely ignore me" plan and refused to even acknowledge my presence whenever I dropped in to check on her and Sola.

Fortunately, the rest of our trek was utterly uneventful—we crossed some vast, man-made canals a few times, which was a whole, big procedure that took like five hours and was a giant pain in the ass. And one time the entire caravan basically snuck up on a red Martian guy and scared the shit out of him, but that's about it. So I can spare *you* the boring, tedious details, at the very least.

As for me, I spent hours and hours worrying about Madeline and my mom back home, and just plain missing them. Also, pondering my predicament. Not the active-plot bullshit about the caravan and rescue and all that, but whatever the hell was even going on with voyaging through literature in the first place. I had promised myself that I wasn't going back down the whole "is this real or is it a dream" shithole, but, you know, it was *me*, and I had a LOT of time on my hands while we travelled.

Back in Oz, it had been easy to believe that the whole world was an elaborate setup, because everything was so goddamn *whimsical*. Even though the days were long and the nights were cold and the yellow bricks made your feet sore as shit when you had to trudge over them all fucking day, the whole affair had the ambiance of an elaborately overproduced elementary school play. Barsoom, on the other hand, wasn't like that *at all*.

It was stark, empty, and brutal—which I guess made sense, considering the source material—but most importantly, it felt like a *real place*.

And the more I thought about it, the more I noticed some odd details about the whole scenario, too. For example, it didn't occur to me until that long, boring stretch of thoat riding, but when I first woke up on Barsoom, I was in my *sneakers*. My final moments in Oz had been dangling off a hot air balloon in my socks, after the silver slippers had disappeared. I had lost track of where my regular shoes even *were*. So had someone come and placed them on my feet while I was laying unconscious in the desert? Did they just *materialize* there when I started a new voyage?

Also, the weather on this planet was weirdly mild. Like, coincidentally the *perfect temperature* for me to be comfortable in my hoodie, *all the time*, even though everybody else was pretty much naked, and sweating balls. And *my clothes weren't getting particularly dirty*. I mean, it's not like they felt freshly laundered every morning or anything, but have you ever tried wearing *the same underwear* every day for like three weeks at a stretch? Of course not, because THAT IS FUCKING DISGUSTING AND NO ONE WOULD EVER WANT TO DO IT. But somehow *every single day* they were in, like, that second-day state where you could get away with wearing them if you were pretty committed to not doing laundry. I mean, as far as magical realism or whatever goes, it was subtle, but I would take what I could get in this Barsoomian nightmare.

(Also, because SOMEBODY is going to ask, yes, I got my period on the first few days of the trek. I fashioned some makeshift pads from yellow moss and torn-off shreds from one of my capes, and it wasn't *great*, but also not that big of a deal.)

Basically, I had decided that either Voyages Through Literature was a legitimate enterprise that—through some unexplained sorcery or technology—had actually sent me into very convincing facsimiles of old books, OR I was straight-up dead, impure thoughts really *were* a mortal sin, and public domain literature was my own personal hell. The former meant I still had some slim chance of ever seeing Calabasas again, though, so fuck it, let's go with that.

Those were my thoughts as we rolled into Thark, domain of Tal Hajus.

The ancient, shitty ruins of Thark turned out to be a lot like the ancient, shitty ruins we just came from, only bigger, and filled with like thirty thousand green Martians (although apparently they STILL hadn't managed

to sweep the giant white gorillas out of the outer boroughs). The citizens seemed mostly uninterested in our caravan—at least, until word started to spread about a pair of *truly* fascinating prisoners it was transporting, unlike any that had ever been seen before.

So that wasn't great.

Nobody came to haul me off in chains, though. After we stopped, my staff of women and children gathered around me awaiting orders, so I told them to settle into one of the empty buildings, and set off on my own to find Sola. Fortunately, Toto found me first—I heard an enthusiastic honk-bark, and looked up to see his goofy head popping out the window of another building on the same street.

He was there to protect Dejah Thoris while Sola went off on some kind of urgent business, and tackled me in a big monster-dog hug as soon as I hit the entryway. I had ordered him to remain with Sola and Dejah after the whole Sarkoja/Zad stabbing fiasco, and to be honest, I missed him.

The princess, needless to say, was less enthusiastic in her greeting. "What does Dotar Sojat, chieftain of Thark, command of his captive, Dejah Thoris?" The look she gave me could have, like, *skeletonized a cow*. At least we were on speaking terms again, though.

"Dejah, *listen*," I said. "I know you're pissed at me. But we have to *go*." Now that the caravan had reached its end, shit was getting *real*, and I was kicking myself for not making this conversation happen earlier, when there were only a thousand green Martians between us and freedom, instead of, like, a billion kajillion. "Can we just call a truce? Long enough to escape certain doom?" Her expression didn't change one iota. "Do you get what I'm saying, here?"

"I understand your words, Dotar Sojat," she said. "But *you* I do not understand. You are a queer mixture of child and man, of brute and noble. I only wish that I might know your heart."

On that last line, finally, her voice softened. Because *of course* she was in love with me. *Of course* she was being held captive and on the way to her LITERAL execution, but her primary worry was that her manly hero had spurned her advances. It was *the fucking worst*, but it also *wasn't her fault*. Jesus, I thought *I* was trapped in this god-awful book. She had to deal with all the gloom, tedium, and brutality, PLUS shitty, poorly written character motivations.

All I knew was that we were running out of options, fast. Should I just tell her I was in love with her and hope that patched things up enough that she'd help me save her goddamned *life*? I definitely got the feeling that's what the book *wanted* me to do. But even if it was ultimately for her own good, spouting romantic bullshit felt horribly wrong on at least a couple of levels. It also didn't help that once she had let down her guard, her eyes were motherfucking *captivating*. Like, she wasn't technically my type, or even my type's *gender*, and yet when I met her gaze, all I wanted to do was protect her and cherish her and be hers forever and adopt lesbian Martian babies together.

"My heart," I said at last, "just wants to get you to freedom. When you're safely back with your people in Red Mars City or wherever, I'm yours to command. You can banish me forever, or we can sit around braiding each other's hair, but until then all I ask is that you trust me, and that we get out of this place, as quickly as we possibly can, so we can *both* have a future to even figure any of this stuff out in."

Her expression absolutely *blossomed*. "I will respect your wishes, *J. Carter*. I have twice wronged you in my thoughts, and again I ask for your forgiveness."

She leaned toward me, and in that moment, all the complex situational morality of our entire fucked-up scenario melted away. She was just a girl, standing in front of another girl, who was fifteen but disguised as a thirty-year-old naked man, asking him to love her. On Mars. And I have no idea how even the *physical logistics* of that would have worked, but I'm a hundred and fifty percent sure I would have found out if Sola hadn't chosen that exact moment to come bursting into the room.

"That horrible Sarkoja has been before Tal Hajus," she said. *FUCKING SARKOJA!* "And from what I have heard upon the plaza, you will both be thrown to the wild calots in the great arena as soon as the hordes have been assembled for the yearly games."

Well, shit. I didn't even want to know what a wild calot was. "Then we escape tonight," I said. "Sola, I know you said you had no place outside the clan, but please, please, please come with us. Whatever happens out there can't POSSIBLY be worse than your life here."

Dejah Thoris agreed wholeheartedly. "Yes! You have voiced your concerns about living among my people many times, but I am a Princess of Helium, and I can promise you not only a home with us, but the love and

affection your nature craves and which must also be denied you by the customs of your own race."

So they had already discussed this among themselves—that was somehow heartening.

"Come with us, Sola," Dejah continued. "Your fate would be terrible if they thought you had aided us. But, more importantly, I want you to come to a land of sunshine and happiness, amongst a people who know the meaning of love, sympathy and gratitude. Say that you will come, Sola. Tell me that you will."

At first, Sola said nothing. Then, half to herself, she muttered, "The great waterway that leads to Helium is but fifty miles to the South, and then Helium lies five hundred miles down its path. But they would know our course, and pursue us to the gates of the city itself."

I took that as a yes. Dejah pulled a diamond from her hair, dropped to her knees, and began scratching a map into the room's marble floor. "This is Helium," she said, "and this is Thark, where we are held captive now." She continued to sketch in roads, canals, and other settlements, but insisted that we wouldn't be safe in any of those, since none were friendly to her people.

"What's this line here?" I asked. "It goes to Helium, right?"

"It is one of the waterways we crossed on the journey here," she said. "Two hundred miles to the north."

"They would never suspect that we would try for that distant waterway," Sola said. Well, sure, because if that was our plan we would have to be *morons* not to try it, like, A WEEK AGO when we were there the first time. Still, it was the best we could come up with. And at least we had the element of terrible fucking planning on our side.

Once that was settled, we wasted no time. Sola and Dejah began gathering whatever supplies they could get their hands on, and I headed toward the thoat corral to find Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. Sneaking into the stable area actually might have been the scariest thing I had done in this book so far, nearly fatal death match included. There were thousands of the beasts in there, and the vast majority of them had *not* been trained on cuddles. Thankfully, though, my girls came bounding toward me as soon as I whisper-shouted their names.

By now darkness had fallen, and I led the pair of them toward the edge of town, keeping to the shadows as much as possible (which, considering the sheer mass of my ponies, was probably a pointless exercise). Finally we reached the abandoned watchtower where I was supposed to meet up with Sola and Dejah (Sparky, it turned out, had been moved with the other children into their own building, and Sola didn't seem particularly interested in fetching him, so I sure as hell wasn't going to push the matter).

I had expected them to beat me there, but they were nowhere to be found. Shit. Well, there were plenty of perfectly innocent reasons they might be delayed, right? I mean, it wasn't *necessarily* because our plan had been discovered and they had been captured and we were all completely monkeyfucked, right?

After a solid hour, though, I was still waiting. SON OF A BITCH. I left the horses hidden it the watchtower (the entire first floor was completely overgrown with moss, so they were happy as clams there anyway) and made my way back toward the city center.

It took some time, since I was trying to stay hidden from view, and all the ancient, ruined buildings in that place looked EXACTLY THE SAME, but I eventually found what I hoped was the back side of Sola's apartment, and jumped up to a window on her floor.

As soon as I was inside, I heard voices coming from an adjacent room.

"...and when he returns to this chamber," one of them said, "as he surely will when he finds she does not meet him at the city's edge, you four are to spring upon him and disarm him—it will take all four of you, if the reports are correct."

Other voices grunted in return. "Permit no other to enter this apartment before he comes," the first voice continued. "There will be no danger of the girl returning, for by this time she is safe in the arms of Tal Hajus. And may all her ancestors have pity on her, for Tal Hajus will have none."

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck.

"I go," the voice said. "And if you fail to capture him when he comes, I commend your carcasses to the cold bosom of Iss."

CHAPTER XV.

A COSTLY RECAPTURE.

I hopped my ass right back out the window. I should have known that if I was going to escape Thark with my friends, I was going to have to do it the fucking *hard way*.

Tal Hajus's palace wasn't hard to find—it was the largest structure in the city (which *also* looked like an old administrative building, since it turned out that ancient Martians had massive bureaucracies, and Tharks selected their homes entirely based on size). All the rooms on the first floor were lit.

One nice thing about being the tiniest person in Monster Land is that it makes sneaking around pretty easy. I leapt into a window on the unlit third story and crept into the office-palace. What I discovered was that central rooms had all been gutted and torn out, from the ground floor all the way up to the domed roof, to create a massive central hall. This turned my hiding place on the third floor into sort of a darkened balcony, from which I could see hundreds of green Martians packed into the chamber. Right in the center, on a raised platform, was biggest, ugliest Thark I had yet to see, with the cruelest sneer plastered across his face. That would be your Tal Hajus, I guessed.

And at his feet, in chains, were Sola and Dejah Thoris.

Dejah stood with her head held high, and she wielded her mighty bitchface like a fucking cannon. She was speaking, and although I couldn't make out her words or thoughts from that distance, one thing was certain—there was no tremble in her voice. Chains or no, she addressed that assembly as if it were hers to command.

Tal Hajus snorted, and gave the order to have the hall cleared. As the throng melted away into the adjoining chambers, however, I saw one figure linger. In the shadows, behind a massive support column (the Tharks knew enough about construction, apparently, to at least keep the roof up) stood Tars Tarkas. And, unlike Dejah Thoris, I could read *his* mind as clearly as

the five-year-old thugs back in murder school. It wasn't even proper language, just raw, unfiltered emotion: rage, loathing, and the still-raw longing for a long-dead love.

For a moment, I thought my old buddy was going to do my job for me. Alas, one thought was missing from his mind-tirade: *daughter*. If the big guy had realized who Sola truly was, I'm confident that he wouldn't have left her to the dubious mercy of Tal Hajus. As it was, he swallowed his anger and slipped away. With an empty hall beneath me, I was able to hop down into the room unobserved, and took over his spot behind the column.

From there, I could hear every word.

"Princess of Helium," Tal Hajus began, his voice filled with so much malice and self-importance that it would have completely rounded the corner into comedy if I wasn't worried that one of my friends could be scheduled to *die* in this scene. "I might wring a mighty ransom from your people would I but return you to them unharmed."

Yes! Do that! If I had a dollar for every time some big bad villain legitimately ignored his own self-interests because the writer needed to *motivate* someone, I'd—well, I don't know *what* I'd have done, because I didn't watch or read a ton of bullshit like this. But I'd have AT LEAST a dollar.

"But a thousand times rather would I watch that beautiful face writhe in the agony of torture. It shall be long drawn out, that I promise you. The terrors of your death shall haunt the slumbers of the red men through all the ages to come."

Jesus, guy. Reign it in.

"They will shudder in the shadows of the night as their fathers tell them of the awful vengeance of the green men, of the power and might and hate and cruelty of Tal Hajus!" Yadda yadda yadda.

"But before the torture, you shall be *mine* for one short hour, and word of *that* shall—"

Oh, fuck you.

I bounded out of the shadows and smacked him in his giant, stupid Martian head. "Everything has to be a motherfucking rape threat? EVERYTHING?" He tried to scramble to his feet in shock, but I hammered him in the gut, then again square in his face. "Oh, I'm a stereotypical, ridiculous, moustache-twirling bad guy, all I love is random torture, but WAIT! It's a pretty girl! Can't let her get away without a rapin'!" I wasn't

even talking to Tal Hajus anymore (although I *was* still kicking him). I was talking to Author McAuthorson, the long-dead shit-heel who wrote this fucking thing. "You want somebody raped? Rape your fucking HERO. Rape somebody you didn't write into this fucking story for the *sole purpose* of making your hero FEEL BAD when he gets to the part with ALL THE FUCKING RAPE."

The Martian chief had stopped moving about halfway through my tirade. Did I kill him? Maybe. Probably. Who fucking cared? The chains restraining my friends weren't even half as thick as the ones they used in the chariot, so I snapped them with one, quick yank.

"You two ready to get the fuck out of this town?" They both looked a bit stunned, but shook it off quickly. We managed to sneak back out through the third-floor window without being seen (thanks for banishing every single person out of your throne room so you could monologue in seclusion, dumbass). Then we retraced my original, shadow-covered route back to the watchtower, loaded up the thoats, and rode off into the hills. We had travelled for miles, Dejah and I on Rainbow Dash and Sola on Twilight Sparkle, before anyone spoke. Finally, Dejah broke the silence.

"If we make it, my chieftain, the debt of Helium will be a mighty one, greater than she can ever pay you, and—"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Seriously, it wasn't even that hard."

The part that did worry me, however, was that thanks to our escape plan going all sideways, we were on our way without an ounce of food, and barely any water. I didn't know what the limits of thoat endurance were, but I was afraid we were going to have to push the poor girls to the point of exhaustion if we had any hope of reaching the canal before starving to death.

And to make things worse, when the warriors had captured Sola and Dejah, they had been forced to subdue Toto first. I had no way of knowing if he survived the experience, but now that we had fled the city without him, there was very little chance that I would ever see my beloved monster-dog again.

We rode all night and straight through the following day with very few rests, then collapsed on a mossy hill for five or six hours until sunrise. Was there any chance that we were near the end of this book? Like, once we reached Helium, big dance party, and fade to black? I mean, defeating Tal Hajus *could* have been a dramatic conclusion. My gut told me it wouldn't

be that easy, but what did my gut know? Back in Oz, the big, obvious, climax to the entire plot happened barely halfway through, and then we had to dick around all over the place before Glinda the Good Witch finally sent Dorothy home.

Oz. *Sigh*. It was times like this when I genuinely missed that place. For starters, Rainbow Dash wasn't nearly as comfortable to sleep cuddled up against as the Cowardly Lion—she must have been cold blooded, since her ass was *freezing*, plus her skin felt like bark. I missed my other Oz friends, too. The Tin Man and his endless, emo pining. Trying in vain to teach the Scarecrow how to swear.

"Hey, Sola," I said through the darkness. "Do me a favor. Can you say the word 'motherfucker'?"

"I think I understand this term from context," she said, "but I have never understood why you use it so much. We Tharks have fucking, of course, but do not know our mothers. So the fucking of a mother, or the *fucking* fucking, as you might say—"

Dejah Thoris interrupted her. "It is a pejorative term, I believe. We of Helium know our mothers very well indeed, and any man who might fuck his own would be outcast. So to call another a fucker of mothers is to call him a vile, contemptible fiend. Then a *fucking* fucker of mothers would be more reviled still, and to say 'fuck you, fucking fucker of mothers,' is the insult at its most grave."

"Okay, okay..." I said. "I don't say 'fuck' that much, do I?"

Dejah laughed. "It is sprinkled throughout your conversation like a spice." There was a long pause, which was finally broken by Sola.

"What is a *spice*?"

At break of day, we saddled up the thoats (technically there were no saddles, but you had to use a couple of layers of blankets or you got a nasty case of bark-thigh) and continued on our path. By late afternoon, we fully expected to see the distant trees that line the big, weird canals of Barsoom. By then, we were about ready to bite each other's heads off from hunger and thirst.

And no trees appeared.

"Oh, shit," I said. "Are we LOST?" Neither Sola nor Dejah said a word—they had both realized our predicament long before I had. "How are we *lost*? That's north, right? The sun moves from east to west on this shit-hole of a planet?"

Ugh. "Well, let's draw up another map or something and figure this out. Anybody know what mountains those are?"

"Of course," Dejah Thoris said. "Those are the peaks of, ah..." She shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted. "*Cromnabula*."

Sola frowned. "I have never heard mention of these Cromnabulan peaks." She was as grumpy as I'd ever seen her. "I think you have conjured them solely from your imagination."

"You injure me! Dejah Thoris, granddaughter of ten thousand jeddaks, does not—"

"OH MY GOD." We were all starving and thirsty and exhausted, but this wasn't getting us anywhere. "Let's just climb up the fucking things and see if we can see any canals from up there."

The thoats were well-suited to mountainous terrain, but night fell before we even reached the foothills. We all looked about ready to faint, so we called it a night, and I lay down flat on a moss bed to get some sleep. There would be no bonding or gentle ribbing that night.

Early the next morning I was awakened by some huge body pressing close to mine, accompanied by an unpleasant but familiar stench. I pried open one eye.

Holy shit! "Toto!" I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried by face into his gross, slobbery hug. "I thought you were gone for good!"

My faithful hound had apparently followed us across the trackless waste to share my fate, whatever that turned out to be. And I was overjoyed to see him, but I realized with a start that he had somehow managed to sniff out our trail, and what that implied.

Fuck. "They definitely followed you right to us, didn't they, buddy?"

We didn't see any signs of a Thark search party, but decided we'd better get up that mountain post haste. Not even a mile toward it, though, and despite the fact that we hadn't pushed her much faster than a walk, Rainbow Dash full-on collapsed. She wasn't even the one who got stabbed back in the caravan! She was the *other* one! Dejah and I were thrown clear onto the mossy ground.

Rainbow Dash was in rough shape, unable to even stand. "Surely a long rest, and the coolness of night when it comes will revive him," Sola said (it seemed Rainbow Dash was a *boy* thoat). We couldn't afford to wait that long, though, so I gathered some armfuls of moss, left them in a pile by my

poor steed's head, and we journeyed on, with Dejah riding on Twilight Sparkle (also a boy—who knew?) and the rest of us walking alongside.

So it was Dejah, from her perch atop her mount, who spotted the Tharks first.

They were doubtlessly a party sent out to recapture us, and they were coming through a pass in the mountains we had almost reached. But they were headed southwest, which would take them out of our path. And they were quite a ways off, so if we hunkered down and had just a smidge of luck, they might miss us entirely.

We did just that, and one by one, in single file, they passed through a gap in the ridges where we would be visible to them if they really, *really* looked.

Just as I thought we had pulled it off, the last warrior in line—the *very last fucking guy*—pulled a GODDAMN TELESCOPE out of his pack and scanned the horizon. When he had swung it to our approximate position he stopped, shouted something to his comrades, wheeled his thoat around and came charging straight toward us. Son of a bitch!

"John Carter!" Sola gasped. "Your rifle!"

That's right—I still had most of my weapon pile, harnessed to Twilight Sparkle. "I can barely fire that thing! You should do it!"

"But you are a great warrior, John Carter. I am but a simple—"

"Fuck! Fine!" I was the stupid fucking hero of this book, which meant that I was going to have to do the rifle fighting or whatever you called it. Hopefully, if the plot needed me to be, I would be as good at shooting motherfuckers as I was at parrying the thrusts of their swords. I grabbed the absurd, ten-foot-long gun from its harness, aimed through the sight the way they taught me in murder school, and fired off a shot at the charging thoatsman.

The missile nailed him square in the chest, *and exploded*. Huh. Turns out I'd had a supply of that blast powder I wanted to use as a diversion with me *the whole time*.

The warrior was knocked right out of his seat, but his buddies were hot on his heels. There were dozens of them—surely too many to gun down before they reached us. Shit! Sola and Dejah looked utterly terrified—whatever happened next would have to fall to me.

Okay, Arabella. You're a big, sweaty, testosterone-fueled action hero in a hundred-year-old science fiction war novel. How are you going to save your friends? *Ugh*. I was going to have to sacrifice myself in a big, stupid blaze of massacre-glory, wasn't I?

"Sola—take Dejah Thoris on the thoat and head for the mountains. Even if you can't see the canals from there, it'll be your best chance to hide." She dutifully climbed upon her mount and pulled Dejah up into her lap. Toto clearly wanted to remain behind and help with all the dude-killing, but I ordered him to go and protect the others.

"Safe travels, all of you," I said. "I'll catch up with you in Helium. And don't worry—I've gotten myself out of worse scrapes than this."

That was the biggest lie I'd ever told, and they knew it. Dejah was beside herself. "What? You're not coming with us?" She sprang from her perch and threw her arms around my neck.

"Fly, Sola! Dejah Thoris remains to die with the man she loves!"

I caught Sola's glance and gave my head a tiny shake. I was actually pretty moved by Dejah's gesture, but even though I wasn't sure how all this was supposed to go down, I was reasonably confident it wasn't like that. So I gave Dejah's back an awkward pat, and Sola snatched the princess up with two arms, plopped her back into place, and rode off in a gallop.

With no time to waste, I turned my attention to the charging army, and got the lead rider into my sights. Back in Oz, I had witnessed the Tin Man stoically, systematically cut down *forty* wolves to save my life, and I did my best to channel his grim determination and sheer badassery. Boom. Boom. One after another, my adversaries fell. Jesus, how many exploding bullets were even *in* this thing? Had I been gallivanting all the hell over the countryside with it *loaded*?

The whole lot of them had either fallen or run scurrying for cover—at *least* forty of them, thank you very much—by the time my bullets ran out. Just as I thought I might have pulled it off, though, more riders began charging in from the mountain pass. Oh, hell. The first ones were just the *advance scouts*.

The entire party was a good, solid thousand men.

So I ran. I threw down my useless rifle and hopped as far and as fast as I could in the opposite direction that Sola had ridden. I was exhausted, though, and my pursuers were on thoatback. I gave them a decent chase, but eventually caught my foot on a jagged piece of quartz or some shit and went tumbling over the moss.

They were upon me before I could recover, and the only reason I survived the encounter was because they must have had orders to take me alive—the blows they rained down upon me were blunt instead of stabby.

All went black as I went down beneath them into oblivion.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAINED IN WARHOON.

When I regained consciousness, I was lying on a pile of furs and the oldest, ugliest green Martian woman I had ever seen was bending over me, wrapping my wounds. She turned to a group of warriors standing nearby.

"He will live, O Jed."

"'Tis well," replied somebody I couldn't see. "For he should render rare sport for the great games."

The speaker stepped into my limited field of view, and I didn't recognize him—he was crazy scarred-up, and had a broken tusk and a missing ear, so I feel like I would have remembered him if I'd ever seen him before. Also, instead of the leather and jewelry I was used to seeing on Thark warriors, he was wearing a harness made out of human skulls and *dried*, *severed hands*.

Fuckballs. We hadn't run across a search party sent to recapture us and bring us back to Thark *at all*. This was an *entirely different green Martian horde*.

This part of the story contains by far the worst stuff I had to personally endure during my entire stay on Mars, but the good news is that at least it's going to be brief. I have no idea how long the original author spent describing the ordeal—probably hours, because it went on for *fucking days*—but I'm going to spare you most of the grim, tedious bullshit.

Here's what you need to know:

Once they finished treating me with their expert bandaging and magic creams, they strapped me to a really angry thoat and marched me off to Warhoon, the city that was also their clan's name. This was the group we had almost run into during the caravan ride, whose unborn babies the Tharks had massacred (good times).

They were actually on a mission to retaliate for the incubator mess by attacking a small Thark satellite community, but as we travelled, the jed who caught me got in a big fight with his jeddak over how badly I was

going to be slaughtered in the arena, and wound up killing his boss. Their sexual tension was off the charts, in a shitty, murderous, severed-hand-wearing kind of way. Seriously, they fought bare-handed, and the jeddak was winning almost the entire time. But then he slipped on something, and Dak Kova (I guess my captor's name was Dak Kova?) *stabbed him in the balls with his one unbroken tusk and tore a hole in him straight up to his jaw*.

WHY WOULD ANYONE EVEN PUT THAT IN A BOOK? WHO WOULD WANT TO READ IT? I certainly didn't want to sit there and watch it, that's for damn sure. Barsoom was officially the *woooooooorst*.

So now he was the king of the Warhoons, and he was like, fuck it, let's hold off on seeking revenge for the baby-slaughter until after our rad gladiatorial Olympics or whatever. This was after he spent three entire days barely recovering from his own wounds, of course. I have no idea what might happen to the government of a green Martian horde if the two top assholes killed *each other* in a fight. Representative democracy, maybe? Fingers crossed!

Regardless, he did get better, and they hauled me back to Warhoon and threw me in a dark cage for who even fucking knows how long. It was *not* great. I damn near went crazy in that hole.

There were other creatures *in there with me*, too. Creepy, quiet, huge six-eyed things that I caught glimpses of in the shadows every once in a while. I was restrained with chains too sturdy for me to break, so I didn't get the chance to explore the cell much to figure out what they were or where they scurried off to.

I spent a lot of time just waiting for the plot to get moving. They had talked about the great games—it was a reasonable assumption that I'd be made to fight in them, and could either escape, or battle my way up through the ranks and become king, or unionize everybody and teach them the ways of passive resistance, or whatever was supposed to happen once this whole thing turned into a fucking *gladiator movie*. But the plot never seemed to arrive. Eventually, I decided I had to think like that manly action hero again, and figure out an escape.

I have to tell you, I was pretty far gone by that point. So I waited for the guy who brought me food, hid in the shadows, and bashed his head with what little slack I could gather in my chain as soon as he bent over to put down my lunch.

For whatever reason, he unlocked my cage every day to do it, so I knew he had keys. And I was willing to bet that the key to my restraints was on his ring too—I mean, why wouldn't it be? As I started to rifle through the massive, four-armed heap of him, it became quite clear that he was dead.

And even though I already knew my escape might go down that way, I still had a brief "oh my God, what have I done" moment—after all, this guy hadn't attacked me, or tried to butcher any of my friends. He was just some Martian schmo who had a crappy job feeding prisoners.

As I stood there dealing with my existential mini-crisis, one of those motherfucking six-eyed critters dragged him away, keys and all.

Crap in a hat.

CHAPTER XVII.

BATTLING IN THE ARENA.

Those creatures must be part of the prison cell ecosystem, I realized—waiting for something to die, then dragging it off to feast. Well, Christmas was coming early this year, because at that point (and I couldn't blame them) my captors stopped bringing me food. I was definitely going to be their next meal.

After an indeterminate, torturous length of time (the feedings were the only metric I had to measure it by, and now that they had stopped—*shrug*?), a second prisoner was brought in and chained near by. By the dim torchlight, I could see that he was a red Martian.

"Hello?" I whispered after my jailors had left. "Hello! Hi! Um... kaor?" Kaor was the word Dejah Thoris said out loud when she greeted me, so I figured it must be red Martian for hello.

"Who are you who speaks out of the darkness?"

"Oh my God, you have NO IDEA HOW BADLY I NEED SOMEBODY TO TALK TO. I'm Jock Cromber! Wait... Josh Grober? John... *Something*?" Shit. "Uh, do you know a city called Helium? I'm super good friends with those guys."

"I am from Helium," he said. "But I do not recall any of your numerous names."

I went on to tell him the whole story of my time on Mars—or, at least, the parts of it I was sure actually happened and weren't part of starvation fever dreams. I probably mixed at least a little of Oz it there, too (there was a bit about chopping the head off a giant spider which could have gone either way, but at the time seemed too important to leave out).

When I got to the part about parting from Sola and Dejah in the mountains, my jail friend became quite excited.

"I know that pass well, for it is the only one the Warhoons have ever used when marching to the south. Princess Dejah Thoris entered the hills not five miles from a great waterway! Surely she has been found by her countrymen, and is by now quite safe!"

Well, praise Satan. "And they'll take in Sola too, right?"

"Have no concern regarding the Thark—if she is alone, and but a girl, the fighting men of Helium should have no trouble dispatching her."

What? "No, she's a friend! She helped us escape!"

"I apologize for my confusion—much of your story was difficult to follow. I thought you had said she was a Thark."

"Yes, but she's a *friendly* Thark."

"Friendly... *Thark*." He appeared to be struggling with the core concept. "Thark... *friendly*? I'm sorry, I do not understand. Is it like the pet beast who can crush a white ape in its jaws, yet is also small enough to fit inside your pie basket?"

I realized that I *might* have mixed up my Totos once or twice while telling the story. Still, those red Martian bastards had *better* not mess with Sola. This book wouldn't make me stage a *second* big rescue mission to get *Sola* out of captivity in *Helium*, would it?

Who was I kidding? That was *exactly* the kind of thing this book would make me do.

The red Martian shared his own story (which made far more linear sense than my own). His name was Kantos Kan, and he had been on one of the airships that was attacked by Tharks when they captured Dejah Thoris. That particular fleet went on to be attacked again by enemy *red* Martians near some city called Zodanga, and Kantos was one of about ten soldiers who made it back to Helium after the second battle.

At that point Helium sent out a hundred warships and two thousand smaller crafts to scour the planet for the princess—Kantos had taken one of the small ones to make sure she wasn't rotting in a Warhoon dungeon. I wasn't sure if getting tossed in one himself to be double, extra sure had been part of his plan, but if it had, I admired his thoroughness.

"But now we can both die content in the knowledge that Dejah Thoris lives!"

"Okay, *strongly disagree*. Together, we can *definitely* escape this place! I've gotten myself out of tougher scrapes than this!"

I have no idea why I kept saying that. In Oz, there was that one thing with the witch's castle, and before that the toughest scrape I'd ever gotten

myself out of was study hall. Kantos Kan, however, seemed to like the cut of my jib.

As I've said before, though, I was shit at escape plans, and our cell offered FAR less to work with that the Martian city had. We were working on the details of a genuinely awful one (step one: fake death really convincingly to draw in the six-eyed monster. Step two: ??? Step three: profit) when there was a noise at our cell door.

We were both promptly hauled out, crammed into a rolling cage, and wheeled across town to a huge, open-air pit for the great games.

I tried to break the bars, but they were too sturdy, or I was too weak from all the starving, or the plot just wasn't going to let me have this one. In the daylight, I did manage to get a good look at Kantos Kan, though.

Kantos Kan was hot.

His muscles were all well-defined but not too bulky (the cut of my jib was nothing next to the cut of his *hips*) and he was maybe 5'9" or 5'10"—taller than me but not TOO tall. And even though I usually liked them pale, the copper red tan thing was working for him, too. Of course, personalitywise, he wasn't my type at all (all chipper and gung-ho, even IN PRISON), but whatever.

He was also, needless to say, completely naked. I imagined my action hero avatar mostly was, too, since the Warhoons had confiscated my various accessories and *both* my capes. So, two sweaty, naked guys just chilling together in a steel cage. Again, the porn parody WRITES ITSELF.

The dug-out arena itself was half filled with chunks of masonry and other debris, and half filled with all sorts of things in cages. Some were green Martians from other clans, but most were animals. Wild monster-dogs (this is where I finally learned what a calot was), pissed-off-looking thoats, giant mega-elephant zitidars that looked like they might have been rabid, plus a bunch of stuff that was new to me.

"The great games run for ten days," Kantos said. "On each day, the victors of every match will be made to fight each other until there is but one survivor, and that one is set free."

"Really? Even if it's, like, a zitidar?"

"Oh, it's usually a zitidar."

At that point, Martians began filing into the arena, thousands in all, including my old pal Dak Kova, the one-tusked guy who captured me and got himself promoted to jeddak. Then it was go time.

The games were every bit as pointless and vile as you'd imagine. I had to fight a bunch of different times, and fortunately the script had me outclassing each of my opponents as easily as I had before *fucking Sarkoja* had screwed up my last duel to the death. (The main difference being that this time whenever I defeated anything with at least four legs, I *seriously* considered trying to eat it.)

Finally, at the end of the day, there were three of us left: Me, Kantos Kan, and some huge green warrior from a northern horde. Kantos and the green Martian would fight each other, and then the winner would fight me. And, I guess, theoretically die so I could be the big, mighty gladiator hero?

I know I shouldn't have been underestimating the horribleness of the book in general at that point—I mean, it was *fucking horrible*—but I still doubted this chapter was supposed to be about how I met a new friend and then immediately cut his head off. Kantos Kan looked *crazy* outmatched, too. The green Martian was like sixteen feet tall and built like a white ape, and his SWORD was taller than Kantos. Either this was the part where my buddy died in front of me and I had to avenge him, or it was the part where

Wait. What if this was the part where *the final three contestants banded together, refused to fight, and teamed up to escape*? If we could get the hulking warrior on our side, then between my brains, his brawn, and Kantos's—I don't know, unbridled sexuality?—we might just have a chance.

"Kantos!" I whisper-yelled. "Try to stretch out the fight! I TOTALLY have a—"

Kantos Kan grasped the hilt of his sword, wound up like a Major League Baseball pitcher, and hurled the thing directly into the green Martian's heart from like twenty feet away. It was a dick move, but it was a *hell* of a shot. The giant warrior slumped to the ground, dead. I hadn't quite worked out all the details of my plan yet, but as they hauled me into the arena I thought it over, and it worked *way* better with two people, anyway.

"Just *pretend* to fight, okay?" I said as Kantos was prying the sword out of his previous opponent's chest (they didn't bother to haul off the losers between matches, so by this point, the battlefield was like ninety percent dead zitidars and stuff).

This time, Kantos was game. And he was a *terrible* actor too—the crowd hissed and booed as we pranced around and half-assedly swung our

weapons at each other. Fuck those guys, though. We kept at it for about fifteen minutes, until the sun, already low in the sky, had just about hit the horizon. As I mentioned before, sunset and sunrise happen stupid fast on Barsoom. I extended my left arm a few inches from my side.

"Fake stab me! In between my arm and body! This will totally work!"

Kantos made a big, over-exaggerated production of carefully placing his sword under my arm, and I clamped down on it, collapsing onto the ground and howling in *Oscar-caliber* fake agony. Darkness had fallen just as our whole charade began, so I was counting on the fact that nobody in the crowd would be able to *really* see what was going on.

Kantos withdrew his weapon from my side and placed one foot over my throat. Uh... what? He was just trying to sell it, right? I mean, sure, the best way to TRULY guarantee his own freedom would be to ACTUALLY KILL ME FOR REAL, but I surely could trust this guy, right? Who I just met a couple of hours ago? *In jail*?

He thrust his sword into the sand an inch away from my throat, and the crowd *lost its shit*. "Get your freedom and wait for me outside the city!" I said (and I had to pretty much yell it so he could hear me over the cheers).

"Where outside the city?" he shouted back.

"I don't know! East?"

With that, guards came to haul him out, so I had to play the rest of the way dead. The amphitheater slowly emptied, and apparently the zitidar-removal crew didn't come to work until morning, because soon I was alone among the dead.

I was careful to stick to dark patches as I jumped and climbed out of the massive pit, but I needn't have bothered. It turned out the stadium was in a run-down part of town where nobody lived, so I casually strolled off into the hills.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE ATMOSPHERE FACTORY.

Ha! I WAS THE BEST AT PLANS. The one tiny flaw in my execution, though, was that it was a rare moonless night on Barsoom, and I had no idea which way *east* was.

I never did find Kantos Kan out there. I *did* find a bunch of those milk plants that the green Martians squeezed their sole choice of beverage out of, though. They were goofy as hell, too—each one produced, like, a good half gallon. I guzzled as much as I could, got sick and threw it all back up, then went back for more.

This book was the best.

When morning came, I trekked over to the east of the city (I had been southwest of it, so not even particularly close) and spent the day trying to keep out of sight while I searched for my arena pal. "East" was a pretty general term, though, and by sunset, I decided it was hopeless. I really was hoping to see Kantos again, partly because this ordeal was slightly less torturous when I had a friend to talk to. But mostly because I had no idea how to get to Helium without him.

Dicking around in the hills outside Warhoon wasn't doing me any good, though, so I decided to wander off into the wilderness. I travelled by night and slept by day, hiding as best I could under protruding rocks and whatnot. I was hoping to stumble across a city or canal or something, but several nights passed with no such luck. I was occasionally attacked by wild animals, but my telepathy was apparently getting better, because I would inevitably pick up a muffled, animalistic, "DINNER DINNER" right before one pounced.

Which got me to thinking—could I maybe *catch and eat* one of these things? Normally they scurried off once they realized that I had spotted them, but the things that had tried attacking me so far had been about the size of coyotes, and I was a VERY HUNGRY Martian superhero. If I just *let one pounce*, I could probably turn the tables on it and snap its neck or

something? Then find a way to make a fire to cook it over? And not starve to death?

It was worth a shot. And later that night, I got my chance. I heard the familiar, wordless hunger in my head—"Dinner dinner dinner." Wait for it. "Dinner dinner dinner dinner DINNER DINNER DINNER—"

"POUNCE!"

I spun around just as the thing hit me, and my knees immediately buckled under its weight. It was *huge*. It was either the parent of the other critters who had previously tried to eat me or a whole different kind of animal—I couldn't really tell because multiple sets of limbs were pinning me down, and all I could see was a hairy face trying desperately to bury its fangs into me as I struggled to keep my hands around its neck.

We lay there for a minute locked in our big, dumb death hug, but my strength was giving out. Slowly but surely, inch by inch, the fangs crept toward me. Come on! The book wasn't going to end *this way*, was it? I mean, surely this was the part where my buddy leapt out of the bushes. Like, who can save you from giant, ravenous lizard coyotes? Kantos Kan!

It turned out Kantos fucking *kouldn't*. But you know who totally *could*? Toto! My beloved monster-dog sprung from the darkness and tore into my attacker, tearing the thing's throat out with his massive jaws.

"Toto, you big, bloodthirsty, gore-covered sweetheart!" I expected him to tackle me with his usual sloppy slobber-kisses, but he barely even acknowledged my presence before tearing into the beast's carcass.

"Hey, buddy, save some for me. I was going to try to get a fire going and—"

It was too late—that pooch cleaned every scrap of meat from the bone in a *shockingly* brief interval. The whole, gruesome spectacle actually managed to curb my appetite. Toto looked like he needed the meal even more than I did, anyway—the poor guy was skin and bones. I have no idea how he found me. Although it did get me wondering. I had ordered him to protect Sola and Dejah, so if he was here alone, that meant that my friends were... *safe*?

I continued my random wandering, but at least it wasn't as lonely with Toto once again at my side. Over the next few days we managed to catch and kill several more of the lizard-coyotes (all much smaller than the monster that I wisely allowed to very nearly kill me), but I never did

successfully build a fire, so the dog ate far better than I did. Fortunately, we also ran across the occasional crop of milk plants, so I managed to get *some* sustenance.

The days and nights stretched on and on. It got me wondering what the fuck was even *happening* in this book any more. Things had seemed to be progressing in a more or less linear fashion until right about the point where we escaped Thark, and then... who even knew? Had I screwed up and gotten myself way off script? Wait—was that why *Toto found me?* It would be the second time in a row that he showed up right when I was hopelessly lost. Had *the book* sent him to drag me back toward whatever the plot was supposed to be? It would a complete and utter *canis ex machina* (dog from the machine, DO YOU SEE WHAT I DID THERE?), but at that point, poor story structure was the last of my worries.

I stopped in my tracks, called Toto to me, scratched him behind his ears and looked him in square the eyes. "Are you a *cheat function*, buddy? Which way do we go from here?"

He licked my face, and I almost collapsed under the stench of rotting lizard-coyote. *Oh*, *come on!* Then he bolted off at a right angle to the direction we had been travelling.

Which made me realize what an idiot I had been. Regardless of any potential literature-voyage shenanigans, Toto had *found his way to me*, so he was certainly more qualified than I was to lead the way back. And whether he had come from the welcoming bosom of Helium or the site of... *whatever* had separated him from Sola and Dejah, I'd rather be there than roaming the Martian wastes at random.

I followed my dog for the better part of the night, until we finally spotted a row of trees in the distance that I had been told marked the great canals. Hell yes! As we got closer, I spotted a building, too. A spectacularly large one, covering at least a couple of square miles, and by the looks of it, constructed much more recently than the ruins I was used to seeing on this planet.

Was this *Helium*? To be honest, I had expected something that had less of a municipal-power-plant vibe. The huge structure was windowless, but I did manage to locate a tiny, human-sized door, with an even tinier, round hole in the wall next to it.

"Hello?" I shouted into the hole. "Anybody home in there?"

A small, echoing voice shouted back from the hole. "Who goes there? What is the nature of your errand?" The whole thing felt so familiar that I almost told the voice I had come to see the Wizard. I figured that playing it straight would *probably* be my best bet at that stage, however.

"JOMB CROMBER," I said. "I escaped from the arena of the Warhoons? I'm also pretty much dying of starvation and exhaustion, if that helps at all."

"You wear the metal of a green warrior and you are followed by a calot, yet you are the figure of a red man," the voice said. Evidently the hole had video as well. "In color you are neither green nor red. In the name of the ninth ray, what manner of creature are you?"

"A really, REALLY hungry one. And, um, a friend of Dejah Thoris of Helium?" Hopefully dropping the princess's name wouldn't *hurt* my chances. "Come on, please let me in."

The door receded a good fifty feet into the building and then slid to the left, exposing a narrow corridor. Once I passed it, the door slid back into place, and I noticed that it was at least twenty feet thick. Massive steel cylinders dropped into place behind it. So, whatever this place was, I was trapped inside it pretty fucking securely.

A second door opened in front of me, and a third down the hall after that. Soon I found myself in a dining chamber, with food and drink laid out on a big stone table. The disembodied voice told me to satisfy my hunger and feed my calot—Toto was actually full from some lizard-coyote he had killed earlier, but the first part? *That* was going to take a while.

It was the first food I'd had on Mars that wasn't that flavorless cheese stuff, but it's possible that my taste buds had more or less atrophied during that time, because none of it really tasted like anything. Also, there were no utensils, and the texture was just plain weird. I ate roughly forty pounds worth.

My invisible host's voice continued to interrogate me as I ate. "Your statements are most remarkable," he said. (At least, I *thought* it was a he.) "But you are evidently speaking the truth, and it is equally evident that you are not of Barsoom. I can tell that by the conformation of your brain, and the strange location of your internal organs."

"What, you got x-rays or something in here?" I said through a mouth full of mystery lunch. "Do I need, like, a lead sheet for that or something?"

"I do not understand your words, but yes, I can see all that is contained within you but your thoughts. And if you were a Barsoomian, I could read those as well."

A door opened in the far wall, and out popped a wrinkly, old, dried-up little man. He was completely naked except for a Flavor Flav style, dinner plate-sized medallion around his neck.

He sat and spoke with me while I finished my meal (I'm not going to lie to you, it was a *couple* of hours), and he never told me his name, but I did learn a ton about Martian history, society, and science. All of which was boring as shit.

The word "science" in that sentence, by the way, should be *firmly* embedded in quotes. We were in a Barsoomian atmosphere factory, and the way it generated atmosphere was to capture the rays of the sun and separate them with a prism into seven rays of the normal colors we have on Earth, plus two *additional* colors that were available only on Mars. It was the extra-powerful *ninth* ray that powered the place—they stored the ray in reservoirs and refined it with electric vibrations, then pumped it through five principal air centers where it mixed with your every-day space ether to form breathable atmosphere.

So that sounded legit.

It also became clear while he was talking that even though he said he couldn't read my mind, I could read his pretty clearly. Even when he occasionally stopped speaking because he thought an explanation was going over my head, the meaningless technobabble would just keep right on coming telepathically.

He told me that he had spent the last eight hundred years maintaining the factory (which explained how old and gross he was), alternating every six months or so with one other guy. Every living thing on Mars depended on this endeavor for survival, so he mostly felt safe from attack, but needless to say, they were pretty serious about security. As was evidenced by the million-foot-thick door.

"How do you even open that thing, anyway?"

As soon as I asked, a combination of half-word *thought waves* flashed into his mind. Apparently, it was the telepathic password. "Oh, that information is my most closely guarded secret," he said. "I must never divulge it."

His thoughts, however, got real panicky, real fast. *CRAP*, *WHAT IF I CAN'T READ HIS MIND*, *BUT HE CAN READ MINE*? I'm paraphrasing, of course. *DID I JUST ACCIDENTALLY GIVE UP THE DOOR COMBINATION*? *OH FUCK OH FUCK*.

After that, his demeanor toward me became much more guarded. Before he led me to my sleeping chambers, though, he offered to give me a letter to bring to a nearby agricultural officer, who could point me in the direction of the nearest Martian city.

"Do not tell them you are bound to Helium, however, as Zodanga is at war with that country." With that, he bid farewell. "Good night, my friend. May you have a long and restful sleep—yes, a *loooooooong*, *reeeeeeestful sleeeeeeep*."

Okay, so that guy was definitely going to kill me while I slept. I knew because his poker face was terrible, and also because after speaking, he clearly thought *NOW I WILL KILL HIM WHILE HE SLEEPS*.

I mean, the guy was only doing what he thought would keep his atmosphere factory safe, so I wanted to make sure I didn't have to kill him back to get out of there alive. Plus, you know, the factory probably couldn't operate without him, and there was that whole FATE OF EVERY LIVING CREATURE ON MARS business. As far as escaping, though, I wasn't sure what to do. That door was *awfully* thick. I *kind of* remembered his telepathic password, though. Maybe that would get me out?

Only one way to find out. The door to my chambers wasn't locked, so I slipped out and retraced my steps, carefully avoiding the dining room where I could hear him *sharpening a knife*, bless his little heart. I made it to the front entrance, thought the combination toward it, and was delighted to see it slowly slide open in front of me. I marched right out into the tree line, with Toto at my heels.

Was that *it*? The continuation of the whole big storyline that Toto was theoretically leading me toward? To be honest, with all the utter bullshit I'd had to endure so far, I had expected more to happen than a boring conversation and an enormous meal.

Wait a minute—this was *exactly* what had happened in Oz! I got to the big, dramatic action-packed climax, and then the book just dicked around showing me a bunch of random shit until it finally reached the minimum word count for a publishable children's novel. Was it possible that *all* hundred-year-old books were written this way? If so, it meant I was almost

done! A few more pointless china doll suburbs or talking animal forests or whatever, and I'd be home free!

Toto and I made our way down the waterway until we came upon an expanse of farmland. I was half tempted to march right up to one of the houses and ask them for bed and breakfast, the way we always did in Oz. This was *Barsoom*, though, so instead I met the locals when I felt the barrel of a gun poking me between the shoulder blades.

"Whoa, whoa!" I said, throwing my hands up in the air. "I'm unarmed! I was being held prisoner by the green men, and just need directions to Zodanga."

I felt the gun drop, and turned to see three red Martian men, all lowering their rifles. They turned out to be brothers, and government farm administrators, and now that they knew I wasn't some kind of *farmer assassin*, they were terribly excited to have company. They took me back to their houses (which, instead of having locking doors, were raised fifty feet into the air at night in huge metal shafts, because *science*), and I met their wives and kids and everything. They asked me questions about my travels, and I told them all the parts that weren't specifically about Dejah Thoris or Helium. It was nice. In fact, they were so hospitable that I almost felt like I was back in Oz.

Of course, I would later discover that the farms they ran were worked by convicts, prisoners of war, delinquent debtors, and "confirmed bachelors" who were too poor to pay the "celibacy tax."

I mean, it's possible that the whole scenario *wasn't* a conservative dystopian hellscape—depending on how the workers were treated, and the ratio of confirmed bachelors to war prisoners. For all I knew, the whole town turned into one big Fire Island dance party after work every day. But it was probably for the best that I didn't know any of this at the time. Otherwise, chances were good that the whole book would have gone off the rails and turned into some kind of Gay Poor Hunger Games, and I would have *never* completed the actual plot to find my way off that shit hole of a planet.

The brothers advised me to join the military when I got to Zodanga, because everybody there loved soldiers, and until I had proven myself vaguely respectable, no one was likely to believe all my crazy stories. They also gave me a haircut (I pulled my hood tight over my head while they trimmed imaginary locks and shaved my imaginary beard), and offered me

a bottle of red oil so I could dye my imaginary skin to look more like a regular Zodangan. To be honest, it was fucking weird that they just had a bottle of the stuff laying around (*what were they routinely dying red to look like a regular Zodangan*?), but I wasn't about to complain.

After the most pleasant, restful night's sleep I'd had on Mars, the brothers presented me with a new harness with ornaments that would identify me as a member of their own family, a bag of cash, and a miniature thoat that was about the size of a regular horse. I had no idea how to repay them for their frankly creepy levels of hospitality, but they assured me that if I lived long upon Barsoom, there would be ample opportunity.

Then the three of them just stared at me (not even blinking, I assume), as I rode off toward the city.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN AIR SCOUT FOR ZODANGA.

I learned much more about Barsoom over the next few days as I travelled, all of it stupid and boring. I did stay at more random farmhouses along the way, though, and I have one delightful piece of news to report: red Martian food was AMAZING. The alien fruits and vegetables were lush and delicious (the fruit, in particular bore a striking resemblance to the stuff in Oz, because, like, how many types of made-up citruses could they even *come up* with), and the steaks were literally the best I'd eaten in my entire life. Granted, they say that hunger is the best sauce, and I had WEEKS worth of that shit on hand. After who even knew how many days that had ranged from tedious to *active torture*, my first full meal among the red Martians almost brought me to tears. I spent hours trying to explain the concept of a *meat pie* to these people, too, but alas, it appeared that with all the scientific wonders at their disposal, Barsoom lacked basic crust technology.

On the second night, I was welcomed by a family of Martian aristocrats, and their casual dinner conversation happened to turn toward Helium. It seemed that the average Zodangan was getting pretty tired of the war between the two cities.

"Helium," one old man insisted, "rightly boasts the most beautiful women of Barsoom, and the wondrous daughter of Mors Kajak, Dejah Thoris, is the most exquisite flower of all her treasures." Way to keep it skeevy, guy. He was actually working toward a point, though.

"Since her loss in that ill-starred expedition, all Helium has been draped in mourning. That our ruler should have attacked the disabled fleet as it was returning to Helium after losing her was a terrible blunder."

That's right—my arena buddy had mentioned that Helium's enemies had wiped out all but just a couple of guys. "I fear that, sooner or later, Zodanga will be compelled to elevate a wiser man to lead it. Our forces have taken advantage of the absence of the principal fleet of Helium as it

searched for the princess to reduce the city to a sorry plight. Yet, even on the cusp of victory, this war is not a popular one, for it is not based on right, or justice."

"Sucks, man," as said as casually as I possibly could. "Hey, whatever *happened* to that princess, anyway?"

"She is dead," he said. "This much we learned from a green warrior recently captured by our forces in the south."

A *green warrior*? "Hold on, are you talking about a regular, *dude* green warrior? Or a young lady green warrior, with, like, gentle eyes and kind of a big-sister vibe?"

"This I know not. But I do know that the princess escaped from the hordes of Thark with a strange creature of another world, only to fall into the hands of the Warhoons. Their thoats were found wandering the desert, and evidences of a bloody conflict were discovered nearby."

Well, the bloody conflict was all me, so that didn't actually prove anything. But the fact that they had set Twilight Sparkle free—in addition to Toto—certainly didn't bode well. I had to believe this book wouldn't kill Dejah Thoris and Sola off camera just to be shitty. But then again, I already knew the book was FUCKING TERRIBLE, so who even knew?

Also, speaking of Toto, as I made my way closer to Zodanga, it became clear that I had a choice to make. It was obvious that the plot was leading me to the city—every *single* person I met was telling me about Zodanga, and giving me letters of introduction to Zodangan officials, and *dressing me up* so I looked more like a Zodangan. But it was also clear that I could never blend in there with a Tharkian dog trailing me around everywhere. All the folks I'd met so far treated me like I had a pet *rhinoceros*, and the first two hours of every conversation were inevitably about how that even happened.

Should I just skip Zodanga, and head straight for Helium? From the sound of things, they could probably use a Martian superhero right about then, anyway. At the end of the day, though, I decided I had to stick with the story. Which meant saying goodbye.

The shape Toto was in when he found me outside Warhoon proved that he really couldn't survive indefinitely in the Martian wilds alone. Just outside the gates of the city when we reached it at last, I embraced him in one final, disgusting hug.

"I can't take you with me into Zodanga, buddy," I said. Tears came immediately, so praise Satan for telepathy, because the rest of it was an incoherent, blubbery mess. "If I get through any of this alive, I'll come and find you. But for now, go back to Thark and find Tars Tarkas. You're his dog now."

Toto never had any trouble with complex instructions, and I was certain that he understood me. He turned sorrowfully away, and I couldn't bear to watch him go.

The letters given to me a few days back by the Creepy Farm Bros gained me immediate entrance to the city, which was mostly built of brick and steel. It had, like, shops and cafes and stuff, too, and *vegetation*, which was a stark contrast to the Barsoomian ruins where I usually hung out. It was barely past dawn, and the streets were almost empty. As I walked toward the city center where I hoped I could find a Zodangan recruitment office or something, a man walked briskly past me, and I was shocked to discover that *I recognized him*.

"Oh my God! Kantos Kan!"

Like lightning, he wheeled and drew his sword, stopping its blade right at the edge of my neck. "Who are you?" he growled.

I, of course, responded by leaping about thirty feet into the air, and he dropped his weapon and laughed. "Jock John Josh Cromber Grober *Something*!" he exclaimed. "I need no better reply, as there is but one man upon all Barsoom who can bounce about like a rubber ball. How came you here, my friend? And have you become a *darseen*, that you can change your color at will?"

Evidently the red oil—which I had been pretending to rub on my imaginary man-skin every morning in a ridiculous half-assed pantomime just to be sure—was doing the trick.

"You gave me a bad half-minute, my friend," he said after I filled him in on my recent exploits. "Were my name to be known to the Zodangans, I would be shortly sitting on the banks of the lost sea of Korus with my dear and departed ancestors." When I had failed to figure out which direction *east* was, Kantos had returned to Helium without me and been sent out once again on a mission to discover the whereabouts of Dejah Thoris.

"Sab Than, prince of Zodanga, has her hidden in the city," he said, "and has fallen madly in love with her. His father has made her voluntary

marriage to his son the price of peace between our two countries. But Tardos Mor, jeddak of Helium, will not accede to his commands."

Huh. The fact that Dejah Thoris's grandfather hadn't immediately traded her away as a mail-order bride was, like, the *least* horrible thing about this book so far. "He sent word that he and his people would rather look upon the dead face of their princess than see her wed to any but her own choice. And that he personally would prefer being engulfed in the ashes of a lost and burning Helium to joining the metal of his house with that of the jeddak of Zodanga."

Okay, so "go ahead and kill her—fuck it, kill us all" wasn't the *ideal* diplomatic response to a shitty marriage request. Still, it was better than nothing, and my plot instincts had proven correct—at least I was in the right city to perform another daring rescue and finally end this horror show. "What about Sola? Is she here, too?"

"I have been in Zodanga but three days," Kantos said, "and have heard no news of the princess or the savage Thark—"

"Kindly," I corrected him.

"Right, the *kindly* savage Thark who imprisoned her. I have joined the Zodangan navy as an air scout, and I hope in this way to win the confidence of Sab Than, and thus learn the whereabouts of Dejah Thoris."

It turned out he had basically come up with the same plan I had. He bought me breakfast at a cafe where we chose our meals by pushing buttons on the tables, and our plates came rolling out of the kitchen on conveyor belts (*science*!). And then he brought me to work with him to sign me up for the navy.

Kantos Kan, I was beginning to realize, was *super* gay. At first this was a huge relief, because in real life, I *exclusively* develop crushes on guys who I'm a hundred percent confident I could never actually be with. But then it dawned on me that, thanks to my muscle disguise, I was in all likelihood his *exact* type.

So, you know. *Gulp*.

Kantos talked his boss—*also* super gay, although it's possible that all the sweaty nakedness was messing with my ability to tell—into hiring me, and then impersonated me to the people who administered the written exam.

"This ruse will be discovered later," he cheerfully explained, "when they check our weights, measurements, and other personal identification data. But it will be several months before this is done, and we should either be back in Helium or dead by then."

Kantos spent the next few days teaching me how to operate and repair the one-man flying bicycles we'd be assigned as air scouts. I learned the "science" of them, too—they ran on the *eighth* ray, which was a lot like the ninth ray that powered the atmosphere factory, but used exclusively to propel things. It was how their massive airships were able to fly, too—because they filled up the balloon part with *rays*. You know, like you do. One of the first blimps they ever built was accidently filled with *too much* eighth ray, and everybody died. The thing was still in orbit around Barsoom to that day.

I also have to tell you that the sexual tension between me and Kantos was getting *intense*. It was a good thing my fake face was dyed red, because I walked around the hangars fucking *blushing* pretty much 24-7. The fact that there was no power differential between us made his interest in me roughly seven billion times less gross than Dejah Thoris's (not to mention the fact that, although they were both *mesmerizing*, Kantos was the kind of mesmerizing that *tingled inside my bones*). Every time his hand lingered on my shoulder after a manly greeting, or he huddled close to show me some dumb carburetor or whatever, my whole body started fluttering. Like, what if I liked a boy who *wasn't* a sneering, aloof asshole? Who was *nice*? Who *liked me back*? And who *also wasn't a tin robot*?

I should make it clear that nothing ever happened between us. *Of course* nothing happened. Despite my whole carefully cultivated, world-weary confidence schtick, when it came to dating, I wouldn't know a sexual advance if it bit me on the ass. So even if he actually *was* making any moves on me, I certainly wasn't giving him any recognizable signals in return. And anyway, on the fourth day, they sent me out in a plane-bike, and the whole thing turned back into a regular, straight-guy adventure story.

The crafts were pretty easy to control, and zooming around the countryside on one was some crazy-fun Harry Potter quidditch shit, I'll tell you what. I was thinking about trying to start up a *league*. I was cruising around about an hour away from the city trying to scrub NAKED KANTOS HIPS out of my mind, when I spotted three green Martian warriors chasing a tiny red Martian guy in the desert below.

So I swooped down to rescue him. And by "rescue," I mean accidentally crash into the first guy, and then fight the other two in poorly

choreographed hand-to-hand combat (on foot, at least—their thoats ran away and refused to be coaxed back into battle with the flying crazy person). It wasn't my finest hour, but it was *my first* day as an airplane-bicycle pilot, so cut me some slack. Also, the crappy, drawn-out sword fighting part must have looked MUCH more impressive from the sidelines, because the guy I saved kept going on and on about how he'd never seen such prowess.

He turned out to be a naval officer, and we walked back to where he had abandoned his own busted airbike and managed to get it running again. I was almost no help in this regard, since I had spent the entirety of repair class next to a *sexy naked guy*. Fortunately, my own bike was fine, once the guts and stuff were cleaned out of the venty parts.

Once we were back in Zodanga, the officer asked me to, like, *watch a parade with him*? I was a little weirded out by the invitation. But the parade wound up being a military award ceremony thing, and the guy I rescued wound up being the jeddak's *cousin*. He stopped the whole proceedings to speak with the jeddak, and before long, Than Kosis, jeddak of Zodanga and father to the little shit who was demanding to marry Dejah Thoris, was hanging a medal around my neck. He also promoted me to serve in his personal guard on the spot. Well, son of a bitch. Kantos Kan and I had spent days racking our brains, trying to think of a way either of us could distinguish ourselves enough to win the trust of the royal family.

He was going to shit bricks when he heard about *this*.

CHAPTER XX.

I FIND DEJAH.

The jeddak of Zodanga needed constant protection, because assassination was by far the leading cause of death among rulers in that city, by a margin of roughly one hundred percent. They really took the whole "all's fair in love and war" thing to heart, except without the "love" part, and it was war ALL THE TIME. Once the parade ended, the captain of the guard escorted me to my new post, which was behind a curtain in Than Kosis's living chambers.

"The tapestry is a unique weave, which gives the appearance of heavy solidity from one side, but from the other you may perceive all that takes place in the room as readily as though there were no curtain intervening." He was acting *really* proud of his one-way drape technology, so I didn't have the heart to tell him that we'd had basically the same thing in our Jasoomian cop shows since *at least* the 1970s.

"You are to carefully watch over the jeddak until you are relieved in four hours. Make no sound if you can avoid it—Than Kosis prefers to conduct his business as if no guardsmen were necessary or present."

So, basically, "Here's your sudden promotion, enjoy your new spy hole." I was beginning to wonder if the author had spent a few *too* many words on princess speeches, and now had to rush through to the end. Not that I was complaining, mind you. I didn't have to wait the four hours, either—almost immediately after the captain left, a different tapestry split open, and in marched four guards, followed by... wait for it...

Dejah motherfucking Thoris.

A weaselly looking guy who was maybe nineteen—Prince Sab Than, I was guessing—leapt off of a couch and rushed to meet her. Together, they walked hand-in-hand to the jeddak, who rose and actually saluted.

"To what strange freak do I owe this visit from the Princess of Helium, who, two days ago, with rare consideration for my pride, assured me that she would prefer Tal Hajus, the green Thark, to my son?" I have to say, he

might not have been quite in Dejah's league, but this guy's bitchface was nothing to sneer at. As for the princess herself, she was all rainbows and sunshine.

"From the beginning of time on Barsoom it has been a woman's perogative to change her mind regarding matters of the heart. That you will forgive, Than Kosis, as has your son. Two days ago I was not sure of his love for me, but now I am, and I have come to beg you to forget my rash words and to accept the assurance of the Princess of Helium that when the time comes she will wed Sab Than, Prince of Zodanga."

She was laying it on awfully thick. Also, I had almost forgotten how many words she could get out without taking a breath.

"I am glad that you have so decided," the jeddak said. "It is far from my desire to push war further against your people. Your promise shall be recorded, and a proclamation issued forthwith."

Dejah's smile tightened. "Would it not be better, Than Kosis, if the proclamation waited until *after* the war's end? It would look strange indeed to my people and to yours were the Princess of Helium to give herself to her country's enemy in the midst of hostilities."

"Cannot the war be ended at once?" Sab Than blurted out. "It requires but the word of Than Kosis to bring peace. Say it, my father! Say the word that will hasten my happiness, and end this unpopular strife!"

Wow, this kid had it *bad*. As shitty as the whole prisoner of war/forced-marriage trope was, at least it appeared that Dejah Thoris held the power in their particular dynamic.

"We shall see how the people of Helium take to peace," Than Kosis replied. "I shall at least offer it to them."

At this, Dejah Thoris bade farewell and left, followed by her guards. Huh. Arranged political marriage wasn't *great*, but I feel like people used to do it all the time. If Dejah had decided that she could keep weasel-boy firmly under her thumb, it was certainly possible that she was like, "Fuck it, I'll be the future queen of Zodanga." I wasn't going to judge—I didn't know her life. And on the plus side, it would certainly free her would-be action hero savior to run off into the arms of, I don't know, *some random Zodangan air scout*?

If I wasn't a billion percent sure this thing was supposed to end with the traditional princess rescue, I might be tempted to call it a book and just bail. There was also the matter of Sola, though—I still didn't know if the

Zodangans had captured her too, but if they had, she was probably locked up in a dungeon somewhere. During their conversation, I'd considered muttering "hey, what about that green girl" in a low voice from behind the curtain to see if anybody would answer without realizing where the question came from. But couldn't find an opening to get it in.

One way or the other, though, I was certain that I was finally getting near the end of the book. So I abandoned my post and went looking for the princess's chambers. I got myself pretty lost, too, but eventually heard her muffled voice coming from the other side of a door. I opened it, only to discover a small antechamber containing her four guards, who instantly rose to accost me.

"What is the nature of your business here?" one of them demanded.

Hmm. Play it straight, I guess? "I am assigned to Than Kosis," I said, "and wish to speak privately with Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium."

He didn't look convinced. "And your order?"

"Um, to speak privately with Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium."

"I mean your *written* order," the guard said. "No one comes from Than Kosis without carrying an order or the password. You must give me one or the other before you may pass."

"Okay, the password is... Cromnambula?"

All four of them charged me at once. *Shit.* I drew my sword to defend myself, but their imminent demise was *definitely* written into the script, because they were more or less trying to throw themselves on it. I was trying to deflect their thrusts, keep my blade away from their guts, and maybe punch them on the tops of their heads to knock them unconscious or something when the door behind them opened a crack. Out popped the head of Dejah Thoris, and right above it, another face that appeared every bit as curious and annoyed, but was significantly *greener* in complexion.

Sola!

My momentary distraction would prove fatal, as one of my assailants took the opportunity to run himself through with the point of my blade. *Ew*. As I yanked the weapon out of his torso, somehow ALL THREE of the others managed to line up and get sliced across a vital artery on the backswing, *Three Stooges*-style.

Son of a bitch. Well, I'd tried my best. I rushed to the door.

"Who are you, Zodangan?" Dejah Thoris demanded. "Another enemy to harass me in my misery?"

"Seriously?" I was taken aback. "It's a haircut and a man tan. You really can't see through this brilliant disguise?"

Dejah raised an eyebrow, but Sola's jaw straight-up dropped. "John Carter!" she gasped. "Can it truly be you?" I tackled her torso and lower arms in a big bear hug.

"I do not understand this gesture," she said after a lingering moment, but I was so glad to see her again that I kept right on hugging. When I finally released her and turned to the princess, though, the look of distress on her face told me she was in no mood for hugging.

"So what's the deal?" I said. "Do you really want to marry this Prince Sab asshole? Or should we get ourselves the hell out of Zodanga right now?"

"Too late! You are too late!" Now she was almost in tears. "O my chieftain that was, and whom I thought dead—had you but returned one hour before... But now it is too late!"

"You mean because of that thing with the jeddak?" I asked. "I actually watched that, from behind a curtain. It didn't look like that big of a deal to me."

"My promise is given," she said. "And on Barsoom, that is final. The ceremonies that follow are but meaningless formalities. They make the fact of marriage no more certain than does the funeral procession of a jeddak again place the seal of death upon him."

Nice imagery. "I know little of your customs here on Barsoom," I said, "but that sounds stupid. You're *obviously* only doing this to stop the war, and from what I hear, your grandpa already said he'd rather burn Helium to the ground than see that happen, so I say fuck it, let's go."

Dejah Thoris was beside herself. In matters of the heart, she insisted, a Barsoomian's word was his or her bond—in fact, that was what had made her so angry at me while we were prisoners of the Tharks. I guess some casual phrasing I had used at some point had the effect of basically claiming her as my bride? But also, like, calling her a *whore*? She explained it in great detail, but all I really understood was that I had acted like an ass, and she had taken a really long time to get over it, but our verbal courtship had gotten to the point where she was just waiting on one word from me before we were officially hitched, in her eyes and all of Barsoom's. I, of course, had been utterly oblivious to all of this.

And then I died, so she did what she had to do to save her country.

"Now it is useless, J. Carter," she said. "I may never be yours while Sab Than lives."

"Ugh," I said. "So, what? Now I have to kill Sab Than?"

"Not that either!" she insisted. "We are ruled by custom on Barsoom, and I may not wed the man who slays my husband, even in self defense."

I turned to Sola. "You wanna kill Sab Than?"

Sola just shrugged.

"It is useless," Dejah continued. "You must bear this sorrow with me—that, at least, we may share in common. That and the memory of the brief days among the Tharks. You must go now, nor ever see me again. Goodbye, my chieftain that was."

We'll always have being held captives by giant green monsters who tried to murder/rape us. Wistful. I turned to Sola. "How about you? Did you want to get rescued at all today?"

"I have pledged myself to protect Dejah Thoris," she said, "and I fear that she will need my service as a princess of Zodanga all the more. Farewell, John Carter. It brings joy to my heart to know that you have survived." Toto notwithstanding, Sola was by far the best living creature I had met on the planet Mars. If I dwelled one moment longer on how happy I was to see her alive and in relative safety, I was going to break out in tears.

"Same," I said.

And, with that, I wandered out of the room, almost tripping over a dead guard on the way. Oh right—them. I guess I'd pretty much irreparably screwed up my spy gig by that point. There wasn't much I could do but escape the palace with my life, and since I heard people in the distance screaming about dead soldiers before I even found the stairs, even that might prove to be a trick. I finally located a big room with a window I could hopefully escape through, but someone opened the door right behind me, so I jumped up to the ceiling and hid in a chandelier.

It was Than Kosis and his entourage. "Surely this was the work of Heliumites!" said one of his toadies.

"How could six or eight fighting men have entered my palace unobserved, to have defeated my best guards so handily?" Okay, first off, he was *vastly* overestimating the quality of his security. "Well, we shall know soon enough, for here comes the royal psychologist."

Another guy entered the room—he was older, and looked like he had spent the last twenty minutes smelling farts. "O mighty jeddak," he said, "it is a strange tale I read in the dead minds of your faithful guardsmen."

Wow, the royal psychologist didn't fuck around. He said that the residual thoughts of the dead guards had described a lone, rugged, handsome attacker, and they all put two and two together pretty quickly. The cousin whose life I had saved was *mortified*.

The jeddak had decided to use that very room for his base of operations while they put the palace on lockdown, so I was pretty much stuck up in the light fixtures until the end of the day. The mind reader went off and questioned Dejah Thoris, and my old Air Scout partner Kantos Kan, but both my friends had enough control over their thoughts to fool him, and insisted they didn't know anything about me.

By the time they retired for the day it was dark outside, so I hopped out the window and was gone.

CHAPTER XXI.

LOST IN THE SKY.

I managed to sneak back to the air scout barracks, and jumped into the window I *hoped* would lead to the room I shared with Kantos Kan.

I lucked out. "My friend!" Kantos exclaimed. "I expected you back much earlier, as your tour must have ended some time since." I hadn't spoken to him since before the business with my promotion, so I told him the whole, sordid tale.

"Ah, then that explains my visit from the royal psychologist," he said. "To think I was afraid they had checked your admissions test, and known by sight that your towering, well-muscled physique couldn't *possibly* weigh but a lean hundred *kroobs*."

His smile faded, though, as he contemplated the princess's decision. "It's impossible! Why, no man in all Helium but would prefer death to the selling of our beloved princess to the house of Zodanga!" I wasn't quite following his grammar, but his sentiment was clear. "She must have lost her mind to have assented to such an atrocious bargain! If we could but come within sword's reach of Sab Than, my friend, we might save her from her fate."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. The truth was, after Dejah's whole speech on the subject, I wasn't even sure what I was supposed to be *doing* any more. If Kantos thought prince killing was our best play, though, I guess I could be talked into it. "Is there any chance *you* could do it?"

He eyed me narrowly, and I could see the wheels turning in his head. "You love her!" he said at last. "Ha! Does she know it?"

Ugh. "It's a whole thing."

He sprang to his feet, grasped me by the shoulder, and raised his sword above his head.

"And had the choice been left to me, I could not have chosen a more fitting mate for the first princess of Barsoom! Here is my hand upon your shoulder, John Carter"—at some point, we had ironed out the actual

pronunciation of my fake name—"and my word that Sab Than shall go out at the point of my sword for the sake of my love for Helium, for Dejah Thoris, and for you."

I have to admit that I was a *tiny bit* bummed that he hadn't taken the idea of my theoretical devotion to Dejah Thoris... *differently*. Still, if he wanted to do the hard work of getting the plot moving, I was more than happy to let him. In fact, why Kantos Kan wasn't the hero of that book, I still don't understand—seriously, give that guy super strength and a decent vertical leap, and you wouldn't even *need* JORB THORBER.

"If I could but retrieve my flying machine, I could do it tonight," he said. "For I know a secret entrance to the palace through the pinnacle of the highest tower." The entire city was on lockdown, and without magic jumping powers to get him out a window, it was unlikely that Kantos could even leave the barracks without being harassed.

"Okay, get yourself up to roof of the building," I said. "I'll meet you there in like five or ten minutes, tops."

I knew the way from there to the airbike hangar well, but with increased security, reaching it unseen was going to be a massive leaping/climbing/scurrying pain in the ass. I did it, though, and found a lone guard on the hangar rooftop where they kept the smaller crafts. You'll be proud of me when I tell you that I managed to subdue him with less-than-deadly force, too. I left him there tied up with his own cape (capes—they aren't just for chieftains in Zodanga!).

I found the bikes that had been assigned to me and Kantos, and hitched his to the back of mine. It was, like, the one maneuver I actually remembered from training, because you know, tandem air bicycle riding, tee hee. Moments later, I was landing both machines atop the barracks roof before an astonished Kantos Kan.

We lost no time making plans. "I shall enter the palace and dispatch Sab Than," Kantos said, "or give my life in the attempt. I think it best that you head straight for Helium and tell the jeddak all you have learned in Zodanga."

I could barely believe my ears. "Really? I can just *go*?"

His hand was back on my shoulder in a heartbeat. It was hands on shoulders ALL OVER THIS PLACE tonight. "Fear not, my brother, for with a bit of luck we shall be reunited soon enough. I shall set your machine's compass to Helium"—never mind that that wasn't how *compasses* worked—"so that you might make your way there directly."

Something about the whole scenario didn't feel right. I mean, assassination? Don't get me wrong, some whiny, entitled prince who demanded rape-slavery of a political prisoner pretty much deserved what he got. But was sneaking into the palace and just straight-up knifing him really the Warlord of Mars way? The more I thought about it, the more my answer was... kind of? Skipping town and leaving the task to someone else felt less than heroic as well, but, then again, the two problems kind of took care of each other. If assassination was the kind of thing this book thought was a great idea, Kantos could do it, and everything would be fine. If the whole concept was beyond the pale, though, maybe something would stop it from happening? Was I just trying to rationalize this whole, terrible thing just so I could move the fuck on?

Probably. The moving on part, at least, sounded *amazing*. "Farewell, Kantos Kan," I said, putting my hand on his bare, beautiful shoulder in what seemed to be the standard Martian handshake. "Good luck with the murdering and stuff."

"Farewell, John Carter," he said, adding his hand to my own shoulder to make a weird little one-handed embrace. Then he leaned in and kissed me full on my mouth. Lips open, tongue everywhere—it went on for a SOLID half-minute. When he was finished, I felt like *my gums had been cleaned*.

"We shall meet again, my brother, if not under the fair flag of Helium, then in the watery embrace of the river Iss!"

I just stood there, gobsmacked, as he mounted his airbike and flew away. Okay, *first of all*? Don't call a guy "BROTHER" immediately after LICKING HIS TEETH. Also, I was trying to come to terms with the fact that my first kiss—my first really *real* kiss—just happened with a fictional character, on top of the made-up air force barracks. *ON MARS*.

The sky above me was growing thick with flying bicycles, though, so I decided I'd better come to terms with that while getting the fuck out of Zodanga. A group of them attempted to chase me out of the city, but Kantos had done something to our rides to make them extra-fast *Helium-style* flying bicycles, so I had no trouble outrunning them. Seriously, that guy was the best at *everything*. (Except for kissing, maybe? Not that I had a ton of stuff to compare it to, but, dude, *reign it in*.)

Just as I thought I was in the clear, something hit the pointy front part of my airbike and exploded, sending me spinning toward the ground below. Crap! I have no idea how far I fell through the darkness, or how close I was to crashing into the shitty Martian desert, but I finally managed to pull up and straighten out my bike. Okay, Arabella—maybe worry less about kissing and more about flying? Just for now?

Once I was sure I had left the Zodangan Air Patrol far behind, I switched on a small light on my airbike to check the compass. The thing was blasted to hell, though. Helium was supposed to be four or five hours away from Zodanga at top speed, but now the only hint I had to its location was that it was roughly between the position of the two moons. That wasn't going to do me a shit-ton of good as I travelled, though, since both of those moons were *moving*.

By the time dawn broke, fully seven hours later, I still hadn't seen anything but the red and yellow wastes of Mars.

CHAPTER XXII.

TARS TARKAS FINDS A FRIEND.

Fuuuuuuuuuuk. I kept flying, and did run across a couple of Martian cities eventually, but neither of them was Helium. I knew for sure, because Kantos had described the city in considerable detail—it consisted of two individual, round walled metropolises with a bridge between them, and a giant, gaudy-ass tower in the middle of each one, rising a full mile into the sky. The idea of stopping in a strange town didn't seem terribly safe, and when I landed to ask directions from a red Martian caravan, they threw rocks at me, so I just kept flying.

I had gotten used to regular meals over the past week, though, and my stomach was grumbling like crazy. Plus, I was pretty tired of flying that stupid thing, not to mention just plain *regular* tired. Hmm. How much eighth-ray did my airbike have in its tank, anyway?

As luck would have it, I never found out. At one point, I spotted a massive battle of probably ten-thousand green Martians out in the middle of the desert, and, like a dumbass, flew over to check it out. I was so high up they looked like ants, but I had forgotten how accurate they were with their rifles, and how likely they were, even in the middle of *straight-up war*, to take a break from killing each other and gun down passing aircraft.

Those fuckers shot me right out of the sky, and sent me careening haphazardly into a desperate, half-controlled landing right in the center of their battlefield. I walked away from it, at least, so that's the good news. The bad news is that I was exhausted, starving, and just in an overall shitty mood, and now it looked like I was going to have to fight my way out of there and *walk* to Helium.

Wherever the fuck Helium was.

Unless there were a bunch of other hordes who dressed the same way, the chaos around me looked like Warhoons vs. Tharks. The latter had treated me SIGNIFICANTLY better than the former when I was their captive, but to be honest, I didn't actually care that much who won this

thing. If there was any chance I could just sneak away while they all killed each other, that would work out best for me.

A huge Thark was taking on three Warhoonians near the site of my crash, and losing pretty badly. As I tried to casually saunter past, one of the Warhoons turned to me and immediately impaled himself on my sword. *Ugh.* Looks like a gore-covered afternoon was in the cards after all.

The Thark took advantage of my "aid" to quickly dispatch one of his remaining opponents, while the other charged me and promptly beheaded himself. Then the Thark turned to face me, and I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that, in a crowd of ten thousand, I happened to crash right next to the *one guy* there I actually knew.

"Tars Tarkas! What's up!" A tiny smile passed over his grim lip, and he touched my shoulder. *Whoa*, *whoa* whoa—I wasn't sure I liked where *this* was going. Fortunately, he didn't go for the kiss, though.

"I would scarcely recognize you, John Carter," he said. "But there is no other mortal upon Barsoom who would have done what you did for me. I think I have learned that there is such a thing as 'bros,' my bro."

We fought back-to-back for the rest of the afternoon, which was tedious as hell, but at least when we were finished our team had emerged victorious, and there was acid-milk and bland cheese all around. (After eating real food for a week, I could hardly get the stuff down, but somehow managed to eat about six pounds of it regardless.) Then, since my bike was utterly trashed anyway, Tars lent me a thoat and we headed back to Thark.

It wasn't far. As we padded into town, I remembered something. "Hey, Tars—did Toto ever show up? I totally sent him back here to find you."

As if to answer my question, something came hurling at me from a nearby building, knocking me right out of my seat.

"Toto!" This was probably like the eighth or ninth time he had found me after being left behind in this book, but it never got old. "Who's a good boy? Is it you? ARE YOU A GOOD BOY?" I fucking loved that smelly, slobbery son of a bitch.

"He hasn't left your old living quarters since his return," Tars said. "If I hadn't ordered that the occasional carcass be left in the doorway, I doubt he would have survived the duration."

I managed to get a nap in Tars Tarkas's quarters while he went off to meet with the other chieftains for the post-massacre council meeting or whatever. Just as I was slipping into a REM cycle, though, his loud and UTTERLY INCONSIDERATE return ended my sleep.

"Tal Hajus knows that you are here, John Carter," he said, "for Sarkoja recognized you as we returned from battle. Tal Hajus has ordered me to bring you before him tonight." Fucking Sarkoja! Of course she would be the ONE PERSON who could see through my haircut and spray tan.

"I have ten thoats," Tars continued. "You may take your choice from among them, and I will accompany you to the nearest waterway that leads to Helium. Tars Tarkas may be a cruel green warrior, but he can be a bro as well. Come, we must start."

"Uh, what happens to you, though?" If I knew the green Martians *at all*, I was pretty sure this sounded like the kind of thing that was punishable by a lot of death.

"The wild calots, possibly," he said. "Or worse. Unless I should have the opportunity I have so long awaited of battling with Tal Hajus."

"Then fight him tonight," I said. I mean, I wasn't on any particular schedule. "I'll stay and help. Then you'll be jeddak, and I won't be sentenced to unspeakable torture. It's a win-win." He objected strenuously, but I had something in my back pocket for this one.

"Hey, you remember Sola? She's fine, by the way. I just saw her yesterday, hanging out with Dejah Thoris in Zodanga." He just nodded noncommittally.

"You know she's, like, your *daughter*, right?" The bug-eyed glare he gave me was a *masterpiece*—equal parts surprise, fear, suspicion, and anger.

"Impossible! You know full well that no green Martian child knows her parent, nor any parent his offspring!"

"She told me the whole story, Tars."

His face contorted into various stages of sorrow and rage as I recounted Sola's tale. Once I had finished, though, was a hundred percent on board with killing Tal Hajus *immediately*.

"On our way to the throne," he said, "I would have you accompany me on a visit to Sarkoja's quarters."

Oh, shit. Sarkoja was pretty much the worst, but I still didn't want to watch her get murdered by my pal. "Uh, what are you going to do there?" I asked gingerly.

"Exchange words with her, and nothing more." The way he said "exchange words," though, made me think it *might be* a green Martian euphemism for disemboweling someone with your tusks. Whatever was going to happen though, it's not like I could have talked him out of it. So off we went.

"Sarkoja," he said as we entered her chambers, conveniently located in a building just across the street from Tal Hajus's office palace. "Forty years ago you were instrumental in bringing about the torture and death of a woman named Gozava. I have just discovered that the warrior who loved that woman has learned of your part in the transaction."

Sarkoja's complexion went white as flavorless cheese. She wasn't stupid—she knew *exactly* which warrior they were talking about.

"He may not kill you, Sarkoja, as it is not our custom. But there is nothing to prevent him from tying one end of a strap about your neck and the other to a wild thoat, merely to test your fitness to survive and help perpetuate our race."

Okay, that was a pretty big fucking *loophole*. "Having heard that he would do this on the morrow," Tars Tarkas continued, "I thought it only right to warn you, for I am a just man. The river Iss is but a short pilgrimage, Sarkoja."

And with, we were gone. Come the following morning, so was Sarkoja, and she was never seen or heard from again.

Next up: Tal Hajus. Since I had beaten him within an inch of his life with my bare hands the last time we met, I weirdly chill about this part. Also, it felt like we were starting to *wrap up loose plot threads*, and I was terribly excited about that. Like, once Tars was jeddak of Thark, what was even left? Helium, and probably some kind of stupid, epic battle resulting from the prince's surprise assassination. And then, what? Some light smooching (I wasn't sure with *who* yet, but fingers crossed), and then I'd be done, right?

Right?

Across the courtyard, Tal Hajus was *delighted* to see me. "Strap him to that pillar!" he bellowed. "Heat the irons! With my own hands I shall burn the eyes from his head that he may not pollute my person with his vile gaze!" Obviously, I had been expecting this (well, not eye-burning *specifically*, but something along those lines), and I had prepared a speech.

"Chieftains of Thark!" I boomed to the assembly, completely ignoring their boss. "I have been a chief among you! And today I fought with you, shoulder to shoulder, against the Warhoons, or whoever those guys were. So you at least owe me a trial. Isn't that how this works?"

"Silence!" Tal Hajus roared. "Gag the creature and bind him, as I command!"

Tars' immediate superior, Lorquas Ptomel was there, too. "Tal Hajus!" he said. "Even as jeddak, who are you to set aside the customs of ages among Tharks?" There was a murmur of agreement among the crowd of assembled chieftains, and Tal Hajus grumbled to himself silently, which apparently meant I was up.

"Uh, do I get a lawyer for this part?" I whispered to Tars. The stuff I had already said was everything I had come up with beforehand. He looked at me like he had never even heard of the word, though, so apparently I would have to represent myself. I was pretty sure I didn't actually have to talk them into sparing me, though. I just had to convince them to let Tars Tarkas challenge the king.

"The Tharks are a brave people," I said. "You guys fucking *love* bravery. But all day, while we were doing all that awesome war stuff, where was Tal Hajus? Not fighting, that's for sure. In fact, I'm pretty sure the last time he fought anyone it was *me*, and I'm *tiny*, and I kicked his *ass*."

There was a general, muttered agreement among the crowd—"wow, he's right, that guy does suck," and all that.

"You know who's rad, though?" Now I was on a roll. "Tars Tarkas! He killed like a billion dudes today, plus he loves *justice*, and he's smart! Tars Tarkas, jeddak of Thark—what do you guys think about *that*?" The suggestion was met with a roar of applause. *Everybody* loved Tars Tarkas!

"I mean, if Tal Hajus had any guts at all, he'd fight Tars Tarkas at the mere *suggestion* that he'd be a better jeddak. But look at him! He's shaking in his boots!" None of them wore boots, or even probably knew what boots *were*, but they seemed to get my drift. Also, Tal Hajus looked more like his head was about to explode from rage, but the quivering effect was similar enough. All eyes turned toward him.

Lorquas Ptomel addressed his ruler in a cold, hard voice. "Tal Hajus, never in my long life have I seen a jeddak of Tharks so humiliated. There could be but one answer to this arraignment. We await it."

I had actually been worried that Lorquas Ptomel might step in and make a play for the throne himself, since he outranked Tars, but then again, if he figured he could beat Tal Hajus in a fight, he probably would have tried it years ago. Since his demand was met with silence, he called for a vote from the chieftains, and every single one of them raised his sword in support of Tars Tarkas's challenge.

So that was it. My Tharkian bro fought the mighty Tal Hajus to the death, the whole business lasted about a minute and a half, and in no time I stood before Tars Tarkas, jeddak among the Tharks. His first official act was to make me a full-fledged, non-prisoner-style chieftain with the rank I'd earned before my escape.

"I shall never forget what you have done for me this day," he said. "My thirst for vengeance is quenched at long last. If only gentle Sola, who alone among all Tharks could be the child of my beloved Gozava, were not sealed to her fate behind the impenetrable walls of the vile city Zodanga, my joy would be absolute."

"Um, I just *came* from there," I said. Suddenly I was concocting a plan, and as you know, my plans tended to be AMAZING. "And I don't think those walls are nearly as impenetrable as you think."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LOOTING OF ZODANGA.

Since I was almost definitely going to have to sit through one more giant, awful battle sequence anyway, why not bring the fight back to Zodanga? Tars Tarkas sold his jeds on the idea of sacking the city and rescuing the red princess they had only recently lost themselves, then returning her to Helium to forge an everlasting alliance that would make them the raddest and most powerful horde in the history of Barsoom.

The assembled Tharks were *super* into the idea, partly because this was exactly the kind of daring, forward-thinking leadership they expected from their new jeddak, and partly because they just loved fighting and looting, and they almost *never* got the chance to raid a place as fancy as Zodanga.

Tars wound up being *absurdly* good at jeddakery, too—he managed to enlist the services of three smaller hordes with the promise of war spoils before we even left, and picked up more and more along the way. We traveled by night and hid out in abandoned ruins during the day, and within two weeks from the night he became chief, I stood with Tars Tarkas and the combined might of a hundred and fifty thousand green warriors outside Zodanga's walls.

The battlements were too high even for me, but I was super Martian Fucking Jump Bro, and jumping is what I *did*. So I made a cheerleader pyramid out of green warriors, hopped on *them*, and from there up to the top of the wall. Suck it, Zodanga—you can't tell me what's too high to jump! I lowered myself into the city on a rope made from harness leather, and found a small gateway in the wall that was just barely big enough for a full-sized Thark to squeeze through. It was unguarded, fortunately—the Zodangans were so proud of their wall impenetrability that the rest of their security was basically shit. I mean, I'm sure there were a whole mess of soldiers stationed at the main gate, but I'd let the fifty Tharks currently squeezing into the city worry about that, since their job was to sneak over there under cover of darkness and take the gates from the inside.

My job was to go find my friends.

There was a whole separate wall protecting the royal palace, and after wrestling with that gate a bit (Kantos Kan had shown me how to open these things, but to be honest, I hadn't paid that much attention, so my method involved a lot more punching and kicking than was probably recommended), I found myself in the royal garden. All the lights were on, so I crept to a window and discovered a vast crowd of noble Zodangans packed into the jeddak's audience chamber for some kind of elaborate ceremony already in progress.

Shit. Was it a funeral? Or a *wedding*? Barsoomians didn't have different-colored capes for different occasions, so the clothes weren't helping to tip me off. Than Kosis was seated at one end of the hall, with his wife or whoever, and a procession of servants marched toward him carrying a big, golden chain on a scarlet cushion. The thing had a golden collar with a padlock on each end.

So, *wedding* then. And one that wasn't shying away from all its shitty, rape-slavery implications, either—you had to at least give them credit for going all-out with the imagery. After more servants marched in with what I can only describe as bejeweled *effigies* of the prince and princess, two figures entered from either side of the hall, completely wrapped from head to toe in scarlet silk.

The whole business was *incredibly* stupid, but I have to admit I was a little bit on the edge of my seat. Was Kantos Kan about to pop out of one of those silk cocoons, and be all like "LOL I killed your prince?" Did they both have *dummies* inside? Well, that didn't make sense because they walked in under their own power, but maybe they were palace guards bound and gagged so they could only shuffle, and Kantos and Dejah had already escaped? After a bit of pomp and speechifying I couldn't actually hear, two officers advanced and unwrapped one of the scarlet figures only to reveal—

Saab Than, the whiny, weaselly crown prince himself. Damn it. That meant Kantos Kan had failed. And even though part of me was relieved that the whole assassination plot hadn't gone down as planned, it *probably* meant my friend was dead, or rotting in a dungeon at the very least. Unless —was he about to leap out of the other silk burrito and assassinate the prince on the spot? It would be an absurdly bad plan, but that motherfucker had *nothing* if not a flair for the dramatic.

I wasn't held in suspense long, because the officers proceeded to unwrap the second cocoon, which slowly unveiled the hourglass-shaped, supernaturally hot form of Dejah Thoris.

Well, son of a bitch. After all of the hand-to-hand combat, the endless wandering in the desert, the *jail time*, the massive battle sequences—after *all that*, the climax of this book was going to be a *wedding*? Ugh. I would have almost rather gone back to the assassination thing. Okay, how did I even want to play this? Off in the distance, I could hear a low rumbling—Tars Tarkas's hordes were inside the gates, and Zodanga was actively falling, one way or the other. I guess I could have just sat back and watched the ceremony happen. But I didn't believe for a second that JOCK CROCKER was supposed to storm the city with a hundred and fifty thousand men and witness all of this ridiculous silk-cocoon drama so he could decide that his beloved princess and mortal enemy *made a cute couple*.

The thing was, back when I promised myself I was going to complete the plot of this book as written, I hadn't counted on MARRIAGE being included. But there was no way I was supposed to break this thing up at the last possible moment, kill a whole throne room full of guards, and then NOT immediately wed the princess myself.

The thing was, I *liked* Dejah Thoris. She was tough, and fierce, and didn't take shit from anyone. But the whole thing where she was madly in love with me and had no greater aspiration than to be my *wife* just felt so forced. Tacked-on by whatever author wrote this book a hundred years ago so his manly hero could get all the riches and rewards that were due to him, chief among them a smoking-hot bride. Basically, the whole idea of marrying her made ME feel like the rape-slaver.

What was my alternative, though? Somehow, I had managed to screw up the ending of my last book, and this entire, wretched ordeal had been my punishment for that clusterfuck. If I didn't follow the playbook on this one, who even *knew* what kind of nightmare I'd get stuck in next? *Pride and fucking Prejudice? Moby fucking Dick*? I thought about home, and about my Mom, who by now had probably given up hope of ever seeing me again.

Fuck.

Well, maybe the whole book would just fade to black once I killed all these wedding guests and saved the day? Or at least the boning itself would happen off camera?

If the ceremony included that part where the priest asks the audience if any of them are drunk and secretly in love with the bride or groom, I had already missed it. As I shook myself from my existential crisis, Than Kosis was placing one of the gold collars around his son's neck. He fumbled with the lock for a moment, and then took the second collar from its pillow.

Which was *surely* my cue. I shattered the glass on the oversized window with the hilt of my sword and hurled myself onto the wedding stage with a mighty leap, bringing my blade down to sunder the gilded marriage chain with one fell swoop.

"Grrr!" I said, really putting my back into it. "I am JOG GOMBLER, and nobody marries my crazy-hot girlfriend but me!"

The room broke out into chaos, and the prince himself pulled a jeweled dagger from somewhere beneath his ceremonial ornaments—because, sure, why wouldn't you bring one of *those* to your wedding—and lunged at me. I was probably supposed to kill him, but to be honest my feelings about the guy weren't all that strong—he'd only had one line in this entire book so far, and even that was just sad, little horn-dog whimpering. So I grabbed him by his knife arm and twisted it around behind him. Maybe a royal hostage would come in handy in this situation?

The various assembled soldiers and guardsmen began to get their bearings, and a good thousand swords were all drawn at once. As they started toward the stage, though, I gestured toward the back of the hall with my weapon.

"Look! Tharks!"

All eyes turned toward the entrance, and in stormed Tars Tarkas with at least fifty green warriors on thoatback. The whole place lost its collective shit, and within seconds, Zodangans and Tharks were locked in mortal combat everywhere you looked.

I tossed Sab Than off the stage and started toward Dejah, but the jeddak himself stood in my way, longsword drawn. He turned out to be a surprisingly fierce opponent, too—like, if my brilliant swordsmanship hadn't been built into the script, that guy would have carved the *shit out of me*.

As we did our whole stupid parry-and-thrust routine, I spotted Sab Than climbing back up to the platform to help. Just as Junior lifted his arm to stab

me, though, Dejah Thoris grabbed him, and my weapon found its way into his dad, instantly promoting that whiny brat to king.

He tore himself from the princess's grasp and charged me, joined by half a dozen of his personal guards. Right around that time, the red armies realized that, no matter how ferocious fifty Tharks might be, only four or five of them could engage each of them at once. Which freed the other seven hundred and fifty to rush the stage.

"The woman!" someone cried. "Strike her down! This is her plot. Kill her! Kill the woman!"

Ugh. Sure, never mind the naked guy who just murdered your leader, or the green, four-armed monsters riding *dinosaurs*. Kill the unarmed girl! That bitch ruined *everything*!

I tried to get between Dejah Thoris and the advancing mob, but the fight choreography was keeping me pretty busy. On the bright side, though, if Sab Than managed to get himself cut down my by spasmodically gyrating blade, Martian law said I wasn't allowed to marry the princess, right?

It turned out I wasn't going to get that lucky. In fact, I didn't even kill one more guy before the tide of battle turned and green warriors reached the stage. Tars Tarkas himself was swinging his mighty sword and decapitating like a dozen Zodangans at once. By the time the dust settled, red bodies were piled up everywhere, and there was some random Thark that Dejah Thoris wasn't allowed to marry, because Sab Than was among them.

The princess threw herself into my embrace. "Was there ever such a man?" she exclaimed. "I know that Barsoom has never before—"

I stopped her before she could get herself fully worked up. "Where's Sola?" I asked. "And Kantos Kan?"

She assured me that Sola was safe in the bedchambers upstairs, but didn't even know who Kantos Kan *was*. Crap. So I left Tars Tarkas to guard her and rushed off to find my way to the palace dungeons. They were *huge*, but all the jailors had abandoned their posts to join the fight in the throne room, so I just wandered through hallways full of jail cells yelling my friend's name. Finally I heard a faint response from the darkness in a nearby cage.

"Kantos Kan! Fancy meeting you here, in a *dungeon*. Seriously, do you ever NOT get captured by the enemy when you go on a princess rescue mission? Or is this just part of your cunning plan?" I had grabbed the keys from the wall on my way in, and Kantos laughed as I unlocked his cell.

"Indeed—I have them right where I want them!" He stumbled a bit, and made a little cough that didn't dampen his good cheer a bit. "The truth is, I was captured by the air patrol before I ever reached the high tower of the palace. I never even *saw* Sab Than. And what of the mighty battle I could hear raging upstairs? That is your doing, I presume?"

By that time, the green warriors had secured the palace. After a brief introduction, Tars Tarkas took Kantos as his guide and left to find Sola. At first I was afraid the whole green Martian racism thing was going to come up again, but Kantos (after reaching a hand up toward his shoulder and giving it up as a lost cause) gave Tars a friendly pat on the abs and straight-up winked at him. I felt a pang of jealousy, but the truth was, that guy had sexual chemistry with *everybody*.

Dejah Thoris and I were left alone. She had sunken into the jeddak's throne, and gave me a tired smile. "Can it be that all Earth men are as you? Alone, a stranger, hunted, threatened, persecuted, you have done in a few short months what in all the past ages of Barsoom no man has ever done: joined together the wild hordes of the dried sea bottoms and brought them to fight as allies of a red Martian people." She stood as I approached her, and I took both her hands in mine.

"Tars Tarkas did most of it," I said.

She smiled. "And, other than false modesty, do you have any proclamations, questions, or queries for my ear? For I stand before you free, J. Carter, and at last may hear them."

Was I *really* going to do this? Regardless of whatever messed-up reasons her author had for creating her, to whatever extent Dejah Thoris even *was* a person, this is the person she was. And the look she gave me, so honest and unguarded, so full of certainty and longing and *love* almost buckled my knees. I realized that despite all my perfectly valid rationalizations, it was *that look* that frightened me the most. I hadn't done anything to deserve it. I was just some rando, stuck in a terrible story and trying to follow the rails of the plot to find my way out. Even so, was it even the slightest bit possible that I deserved to have somebody—*anybody*—look at me the way she was looking at me then?

Fuck it, I'd already come this far. "This is the part where I ask for your hand in marriage, right? Or did you have some more speeches you wanted to make first?"

In response, Dejah Thoris melted into my arms and kissed me, and in *stark* contrast to the last time something like that had happened, her lips were soft and firm, her tongue as welcoming as a warm embrace. And thus, in the middle of a throne room full of dead bodies, inside a city filled with death and destruction and the alarms of war, did Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium, true daughter of Mars, the God of War, promise herself in marriage to Arabella Grimsbro, teenager from Calabasas. As for myself, I had contracted a pretty severe case of smoochitis.

And the only cure was more smoothing.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THROUGH CARNAGE TO JOY.

And that was it. I mean, there was still an epic air battle over the skies of Helium to get through—Tars Tarkas loaded up two hundred and fifty blimps with a hundred thousand warriors and we went off to free the city from Zodanga's fleet—but I didn't actually give a shit about any of that. We left Zodanga in the hands of some of the lesser green hordes. Tars figured that without a shared enemy, they would inevitably turn on each other, so it was better to let them do it there and reduce the place to just another abandoned Martian ruin. (Hopefully most of the restaurant owners and regular civilians and stuff had already managed to get out of town? *Question mark?*)

Once we reached Helium, the entire, drawn-out blimp fight only took about an hour, and ended when the captains of the Zodangan vessels flung themselves off their decks in surrender. (Which was a stupid fucking way to surrender, if you asked me, but at least it served as a useful reminder of what kind of craptastic book I was in, sweet makeouts or no.)

We signaled to the Helium flagship that Dejah Thoris was aboard, and apparently they were flying around with specific flags just for this occasion. They unfurled the princess's colors, and docked with our ship mid-air. They were quite shocked when they saw our crew, but Kantos Kan assured them they were *friendly* Tharks. Soon Helium's most esteemed military commanders joined us on deck.

Dejah Thoris knew them all by name. "Lay your hands upon the shoulder of John Carter," she said, "the man to whom Helium owes her princess, as well as her victory today."

They were all perfectly courteous, but the part that seemed to *really* impress them was that we had formed an alliance with the green men. "If you want to thank anybody," I said, "thank this guy here. Say hello to one of Barsoom's greatest soldiers and statesmen, Tars Tarkas, jeddak of Thark." Their greetings to him were every bit as polite as the ones they

gave me, and it was immediately apparent that Tars's careful, measured way of speaking was *ideal* for this sort of formal bullshit. The red/green alliance was off to a fine start.

I started to follow Dejah onto the flagship, but apparently the fighting wasn't over yet. Tars told me he needed me for the part where they went and attacked the Zodangan land forces, so I also had to sit through all of that. It required that we fly several miles away and lower each and every thoat down to the ground on ropes, too, so it took *forever* to even get started.

At that point I found out why Zodanga had been so easy to storm—there were literally like a million of those fuckers surrounding Helium, and they were camped out in *trenches*. The Tharks came at them from one side, though, and the Helium army from other, and after way too many hours of senseless carnage, the last remaining Zodangans surrendered. (At least they were already in holes in the ground, so they didn't have to fall to their dooms to do it.)

The city of Helium was one vast parade route when we entered it—people lined the streets to get a glimpse of their new, green allies, and I guess the word of my involvement had spread, because a lot of them were chanting some version of my name. Toto, who I had kept away from the fighting but had now returned to my side, was having the time of his life.

They marched us into the center of town to meet Dejah's grandpa, Tardos Mors, jeddak of Helium. Up on his riser, with what looked like the city's entire population cheering below, he greeted Tars Tarkas first.

"That Tardos Mors," the jeddak said, earnestly referring to himself in the third person, "may meet the greatest living warrior of Barsoom is a priceless honor. But that he may lay his hand on the shoulder of a friend and ally is a far greater boon."

"Jeddak of Helium," Tars replied. "It has remained for a man of another world to teach the green warriors of Barsoom the meaning of *bros*. To him we owe the fact that the hordes of Thark can understand you, that they can appreciate and reciprocate the sentiments you so graciously express."

Tardos Mors went on to greet the jeddaks of the hordes who had made the cut and not been left behind in Zodanga, and each of their assorted jeds and chieftains. Finally, it was my turn. He laid *two* hands on my shoulders, and for a brief moment I worried that a kiss was coming, but apparently that was exclusively a Kantos Kan thing. "Welcome, my son," he said. "That you are granted the most precious jewel in all Helium, NAY, BARSOOM, is sufficient earnest of my esteem."

By "precious jewel," he meant *his granddaughter*, of course, which was pretty gross. After that I was presented to Mors Kajak, Dejah's dad, and fortunately his greeting was less drenched with trappings of the patriarchy. In fact, he was so overcome with emotion over his daughter's safe return that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get actual words out between his grateful sobs. I didn't have any manly compulsion to hold back tears, and I had already spent a couple of days trying to keep my feelings in check about *killing and killing*, so I hugged him, and together we had a good little cry.

It was nice.

CHAPTER XXV.

FROM JOY TO DEATH.

The celebration party went on and on—like, for *days*. I honestly felt like I was back in Oz for a while there, except with fewer talking animals and WAY more casual nudity. Tars Tarkas made a big ceremony out of announcing Sola as his legit daughter to his collected jeds and chieftains, so that was pretty great. When it was over, she gave me a tiny hint of a smile and pulled me in for her very first intentional hug.

"I'll miss you most of all, Scarecrow," I said. This, of course, earned me one of her puzzled frowns, which was absolutely *perfect*.

Dejah Thoris's dad took a big contingent of diplomats back to Thark to cement their new bonds of peace and friendship. He asked me if I had any tips that would be useful during his time among them, and I was all like, "I recommend the *cheese*."

Mostly, though, I just kept waiting for the book to end. I mean, that HAD to be the grand finale, right? I had ridden a tornado in and out of Oz, but I actually had no idea whatsoever how RON LORBER got to Barsoom, so I didn't even know what kind of escape hatch to be on the lookout for.

As the days wore on, I found myself becoming more and more desperate. Dejah's dad was due back in a month for the big wedding—was I going to be stuck here until *then*? What if I had managed to COMPLETELY screw something up, and now I was trapped FOREVER? That sales lady way back at the mall had said they were in some kind of market research phase. Was this, like, a *bug* they were still trying to work out? The tiny detail of there being NO WAY TO EVER ESCAPE YOUR GODDAMNED LITERATURE VOYAGE?

After six straight days of celebration and revelry, I awoke in the big, soft, hanging bed in Dejah Thoris's chambers. Which was weird, because I hadn't gone to sleep there the night before. No one had said anything specific about it, but I'd gotten the impression that *consummating* or whatever wasn't scheduled to happen until after the nuptials (and despite

my newfound enthusiasm for sweet makeouts, I was one million percent okay with that). I looked out the window and saw that the victory banners and various party decorations throughout the city had all come down.

I asked a random palace guard if he knew where Dejah Thoris was, and was directed to the roof. I found the princess standing over some sort of big, glass roof fixture, with a cup of something in one hand.

"Hold up—do they have *coffee* on Barsoom?"

Dejah smiled. Not being held captive by Zodangans or Tharks had been *good* to her—she looked relaxed and contented, and as radiant as I'd ever seen her. Something about the way she looked at me, too, was new. I shouldered my way past a bunch of guards—they all stood in formation, like they had been permanently assigned to roof duty—and joined her.

"Can it really be five years?" she asked with a smile, taking my hand. "It feels as only yesterday that we first gazed upon our little shrine, though nary a day has passed that we have not met here, joined hand in hand, planning for the future that will soon be upon us."

I followed her gaze into the glass enclosure, and saw a ten-inch-diameter, snow-white egg gleaming in the morning sun.

Hubba-whaaa?

"Holy shit, did you—" I trailed off. Was her biology so different from mine that she literally *laid eggs*, yet was somehow compatible enough that I was going to be an *egg father*? "Did *we*—" I almost made that gesture where you make a circle with one finger and a thumb and then poke another finger through it, but I didn't know how to denote that the second finger was *entirely imaginary and existed only in her mind*.

Something else she'd mentioned finally registered. "Wait, did you say it's been *five years* since the whole thing with Zodanga?"

She gave me a look that said she'd long since stopped trying to make sense of the random things that came out of my mouth. "J. Carter, I will never understand your Jasoomian humor, and yet you never tire of subjecting me to it. You know full well that it's been five years since we built the incubator, and *nine* years since we secured the freedom of my people."

Holy *fuck*. I double checked to make sure I was still in my hoodie, and inspected my reflection as well as I could in the glass. I didn't *look* nine years older. If the author had some absurd post-credit sequence that happened a decade later and I got to fast-forward through the interim, I was

all for it. But if I found out that NINE YEARS had passed back in Calabasas, I was going to LOSE MY SHIT.

The birth—*hatching*, I guess—of our child was as good a way to end this story as any, though. I mean, it had climaxed with a *wedding*, so for such a brutally graphic, war-glorifying adventure novel, it already had a weird number of romantic comedy beats. I put my arm around Dejah and gazed upon our "child" (was it weird that I couldn't stop picturing it pecking its way out of there with a *beak*?). It didn't move.

"So when you say 'soon,' like, how soon are we talking?"

"It will surely no more than three or four short months before the blessed event."

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh. Before I could storm off and follow up on that whole coffee situation, though, a messenger showed up and requested our immediate presence in the jeddak's council chamber. When we arrived, the vibe was *tense*. Jeddak Tardos Mors was pacing back and forth.

"This morning, word reached the several governments of Barsoom that the keeper of the atmosphere plant had made no wireless report for two days," he said. Which made sense, I thought, since if nine years had passed, that would make the guy, like, a million *and nine*.

"We had hoped to hasten the assistant keeper to the plant," he continued. "But just now a cruiser has returned bearing his dead body, which was found beneath his house, horribly mutilated by some assassin. I do not need to tell you what this means to Barsoom."

"You have to send the backup backup guy?"

The jeddak scowled. "To safeguard our survival, *only two men* are ever entrusted with the secrets of the plant at any time. And now the worst, we fear, has happened—instruments show a rapidly decreasing air pressure on all parts of Barsoom. The great engines have stopped pumping, and there is no man alive with the knowledge necessary to restart them in time."

He stopped pacing and sat carefully on his throne. "My gentlemen, we have, at best, three days to live."

How could I POSSIBLY think this book was going to end with a baby bird or whatever when it could instead KILL EVERY SINGLE LIVING THING ON THE PLANET? Had I learned *nothing*? Various noblemen started making speeches about meeting their impending doom with grace and dignity, and people actually *cheered*. Nobody even tried to come up

with a way to save world or anything, and it started to sink in—we were *really doing this*. We were all going to sit around and *slowly die*.

I know I've said this before, but *fuck this book sideways with an industrial floor polisher*. By the morning of the third day, breathing had become difficult at the higher levels of the palace. Random citizens had begun falling into comas, which at least meant they'd already be asleep when they died of fucking asphyxiation. The royal family gathered in a palace courtyard and basically just awaited death.

"We have been very happy, J. Carter," Dejah said. She'd had our egg removed from its place on the roof, and hugged it close to her as she spoke. "And I thank whatever fate overtakes us that it permits us to die together."

She collapsed, and Toto, already panting, pressed close to her side and whimpered. I had spent the previous days waiting for some kind of reprieve, or at least a fade to black or something. But Dejah Thoris was going to *die*, and the book was going to make me *watch*. All of a sudden, the whole, dumb thing started to feel *real*. The air in the garden was getting thin—*this is what ACTUALLY dying would feel like*, *for REAL*.

I straight-up panicked. "Are you guys even TRYING to restart the engines? Do you have people, like, kicking and pounding on shit and everything?"

"It is not the pumps themselves that give us trouble," Tardos Mor said calmly. He had clearly already made his peace. "What's lost to us is any way to open the factory door, and though a crew had been trying to force entry, we've always known there was no hope of sundering its mighty walls. Tomorrow's sun will look down upon a dead world which through all eternity must—"

"Are you *FUCKING KIDDING ME*? Why didn't you just *say that*? I can open the fucking *door*!" I leapt to my feet, and almost passed out from the exertion. "Gas up an airplane-bicycle! One of those super fast Kantos Kan ones! Shit, how much time do we have?"

I raced to the hangar (and had to command Toto to stay behind and guard the palace at least six times along the way). After launching, I discovered that any attempt to fly higher than six feet off the ground left me without sufficient air to breathe, but I tossed everything off the airbike other than the magic compass and my own stupid ass, and reached the atmosphere plant by nightfall.

The air here seemed, if anything, even thinner. Most of the workers who had been sent to operate the enormous, useless drill had already passed out.

"If I can get the door open, can you start the engines?" I said to one of the few remaining guys.

"I can," he said, "If you open them quickly. But it is useless—both who knew the secret of these awful locks are dead. And for three days, men crazed with fear have surged upon this portal in vain attempts to solve its mystery."

"Yeah, it's almost as if your security measures were LIKE SEVEN HUNDRED TIMES WORSE THAT WHAT YOU WERE TRYING TO AVOID BY HAVING THEM." Yelling, it turned out, had been a *terrible* idea—suddenly dizzy, I fell to my knees. Also, I didn't *technically* remember the *actual* telepathic combination to the big, stupid thing, but I was counting on the book's plot to help me in the same way it helped with all the murdering it made me do.

I thought a bunch of random gibberish at the door, and sure as shit, it slowly swung open. My drill worker buddy crawled into the building on hands and knees, and I attempted to follow him, but didn't have the strength.

As I lost consciousness, I thought for a moment that he *must* have succeeded, because I felt a rush of wind, and a weightlessness I had felt in my stomach *exactly two times before*. Either I had pulled it off, and saved all of Barsoom from certain, suffocating death, or that motherfucking tornado was back.

Or, you know, possibly both.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MY RETURN TO EARTH.

I never did find out how CROM JOMBER got to Mars in the first place, but apparently he left it by choking to death outside that atmosphere factory. Or maybe he regained consciousness, went back to his beloved, sexy wife and had a dozen book sequels and a million more bird-children? I didn't know, and I didn't care. My adventure in Oz had left me with a tiny, secret hope that I could one day return, entirely on my own terms, and visit my friends there. Barsoom had, on the other hand, made me reconsider my stance of fucking *book burning*.

I mean, if Dejah and Sola and Kantos and Tars were at all real people outside of the time I'd spent with them, I certainly wished them well and hoped they were living their best lives and all that. And big, gross, Martian Toto I would *genuinely* miss. But I would kill anybody you wanted me to kill, *with my bare hands or my teeth*, if it meant I never had to set one more foot on that god-forsaken planet.

Fortunately, the secret combination to that dumb oxygen plant also worked on the book as a whole, because I was finally free of it. The burning question, of course, was whether I would wake up back in Calabasas, or in another shitty public domain classic.

I'm going to go ahead and let you guess.

* * *

When I awoke, I was in a plush, comfortable bed. And not a hanging Martian sex bed, either—this was a real bedroom, with regular blankets and sheets and wooden furniture and everything. It wasn't mine, though, and it *definitely* didn't look like the Calabasas mall. For a brief moment, I hoped I might be in some sort of Voyages Through Literature central office, relaxing until I was rested enough to fill out their market research form.

(For the record, I fully intended to simply write the words FUCK YOURSELF on it in all capital letters—if they had like a five hundred word minimum or whatever to get the twenty bucks, I would write FUCK and YOURSELF, two hundred and fifty times apiece).

A large mirror was mounted on the far wall, though, and one glance at it crushed that particular dream. An old man stared back at me. I mean, like maybe forty or something, but definitely older than JOMP CROPPER, and a *fuck of a lot* older than me. He was curled up in bed like I was, but while I was in my trusty black hoodie, he was wearing some kind of elaborate, old-timey pajama ensemble.

Son of a *bitch*. What had I done wrong *this time*? Was I supposed to realize I could save Barsoom like three days earlier, and not *lost my life* in the attempt? Actually, the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if I had died at the end of Oz, too. I mean, I did fall off a hot air balloon into a *tornado*.

Well, fuck that noise. Wherever I was now, I was pretty sure it wasn't another stupid *action novel*. This guy was way too skinny, and his bedroom was super posh—all wainscoting and mahogany and shit. So hopefully there wouldn't be a ton of *actively courting death*. Either way, though, I was done passively letting these stories happen to me. I had played that game as well as I possibly could, and it had gotten me nowhere. Whatever this new book was, I was going to be *smarter* than it was.

I vowed to stop trying to play the role that was written for me, and think like *Arabella fucking Grimsbro*. I mean, how brilliant did I even need to be to outsmart Dorothy Gale, or Naked Mars Warlord, or whoever the protagonist of this dumb, new story was supposed to be?

As if to answer my question, there was a rap at the door, and a tall, mustached guy in a bowler hat entered the room. "Very sorry to knock you up, old friend," he said. "But it's a client. It seems that a young lady has arrived in a considerable state of excitement—she waits in the sitting-room as we speak, insisting that her predicament can only be unraveled by the incomparable mind of the legendary *Sherlock Holmes*."

FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU.K.



MATYQUNGMARK AND THAT ONE GUY, SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



ATHERTON HAIGHT, SEATTLE



EVERYONE WHO EVER

told me they liked my book.

You're the reason I thought I could do this, and you mean more to me than this goofy-ass dedication page could ever convey.

INTRODUCTION.

The Adventure of the Speckled Band was one of the shorter Sherlock Holmes works, but I had no way of knowing that at the time. I assumed it was a whole book, and I'd be stuck there for weeks, bare-ass minimum. But of course, the entire thing took less than a day—it was mostly pleasant and comfortable, and I didn't get imprisoned by witches or stabbed by Martians once. Can't have that! Better whisk me away to some other bullshit, so I can get back to starving half to death or having to sleep on a fucking boat or whatever!

Ugh. For the record, this story includes some pretty significant racism against Romani people, but no actual Romani appear in it, so keep in mind that it could have been *far* worse. From what I can tell, Arthur Conan Doyle was a regular amount racist for his time (so, like, PRETTY FUCKING RACIST), plus he *really* hated Mormons for some reason. Also, I guess he tried to kill off Sherlock Holmes at least once because he grew to loathe the character. So at least we have that in common.

At the end of the day, like all my literary voyages, this one turned out to be stupid and pointless, and I learned nothing—except that it takes forever to get anywhere in *hansom cabs*, which smell (unsurprisingly) like horse shit.

Enjoy.

PART I.

THE FIRST PART.

(The original story wasn't broken up into chapters, but 10,000 words is really long and I get bored easily, so I added some.)

So there I was, in a strange bed, in a strange bedroom that was all decked out in 1800s bullshit, with a strange man staring down at me. Most people reading this probably know who I am already, but if you don't, here's the deal: my name's Arabella Grimsbro, I'm fifteen, and apparently getting trapped in the plots of old, out-of-copyright books is my entire fucking life now.

When I didn't return home after my first adventure, I thought I had just screwed the whole thing up. The magic shoes that were supposed to transport me home just brought me to Depression-era Kansas, at which point I freaked out and made them whisk me back to Oz (and promptly fell off a hot air balloon into a tornado). Then the second book took place on Mars with giant, four-armed warriors and naked princesses and whatever, and I literally DIED at the end. Neither of those two dramatic conclusions freed me from my public-domain misery, though, and now I was pretty sure I was in a fucking *Sherlock Holmes* story.

"My dear Holmes, surely you don't mean to keep your client waiting in the sitting room, as distressed as she appears to be."

See, that was my first clue right there.

"When young ladies wander about the city at this hour of the morning," he continued—I went ahead and decided this guy must be Watson because, you know, BRILLIANT ANALYTICAL MIND—"and knock sleepy people out of their beds, their business must be very pressing, indeed."

You know what? Fuck it. I could be Sherlock Holmes. Compared to the brutal, shitty wastelands of Barsoom, Victorian England might as well be a luxury cruise. And if I had learned one thing in my literary adventures so far, it was that everything was stupid and nothing I did mattered, so I decided to solve whatever dumb mystery I was supposed to solve as quickly

as possible and then either tornado off to the next god-awful thing or hang around until my time ran out, enjoying my vacation as a fancy, middle-aged white man in Victorian London.

I climbed out of bed and puttered around by the wardrobe for a moment, but Watson gave no sign whatsoever that he intended to leave the room.

"So when I get dressed in the morning, do you traditionally just stand around and, like, *watch*?" It wasn't the getting naked part that bothered me —when people looked at me in these things, they saw whatever character I was supposed to be playing, so he'd just get an eyeful of pasty white guy. But in real life, I was wearing my trusty hoodie and jeans, which meant that changing clothes—

Wait, *hold the motherfucking phone*. "Watson, who does the *laundry* around here?"

His eyes lit up. "This is one of your logic puzzles, I presume? I shall play along, of course. As to your first inquiry, I may only state that two bachelors sharing rooms have nary a shred of privacy between them and might commonly observe every—"

"THE LAUNDRY, Watson."

"Why, Mrs. Hudson employs a service, of course, which—"

"Ha!" Watson fell silent, waiting patiently for me to explain. The guy was clearly accustomed to being rudely interrupted. "Uh, just go downstairs and tell the client I'll be down... you know, *presently*, or whatever."

His dejected glance told me that partially undressed bro times were probably the highlight of his day, but he nodded dutifully and left the room. Something about the guy was oddly charming—even *attractive*, maybe? Of the two of them, Sherlock Holmes would usually be way more my type than Dr. Watson (even though my friend Madeline had forced me to watch one episode of the modern-day BBC version, and I just couldn't get past that guy's weird face).

This Watson was quite a bit different from the one on TV, though. For starters, he was tall and somehow absolutely *rocking* a goofy-ass 1800s mustache. It was the twinkle in his eye, though—his *adoring gaze*—that was really getting to me. I had seen that look before, and recently. That was the way *Dejah Thoris* looked at *John Carter, Warlord of Mars*. Something about Dejah's utter devotion had always set me on edge, though—everything about her was essentially created in a lab to cater to teenage boy fantasies, and even though there turned out to be a surprising amount of

overlap with the fantasies of a mostly straight teenage *girl*, the underlying dynamic always felt pretty gross.

This, however, was just two forty-something pals sharing an apartment together with no creepy power differential to get in the way. And one billion fanfic stories notwithstanding, as far as I knew, this guy was only created to, like, marvel at Sherlock's cleverness or chronicle his exploits or whatever the fuck it was Watson even did in these books.

Whatever. The part I was genuinely excited about was *getting clean clothes*. And not just surprisingly-less-filthy-than-you-would-assume-considering-I-wore-them-for-weeks-on-end-in-a-desert-and-got-stabbed-through-them-multiple-times clean but ACTUALLY CLEAN FOR REAL. I considered taking about forty baths as well but ultimately decided they could wait until after finding out whatever the hell kind of mystery was waiting for me downstairs in the sitting room.

PART II.

SOME WOMAN TELLS US HER WHOLE STORY, WHICH TAKES UP LIKE HALF THE BOOK.

Soon my own clothes were stuffed in a hamper, and I was dressed in a comically baggy, olden-times, middle-aged-man ensemble, sleeves and cuffs rolled up high. (And when I say "soon" I mean like thirty minutes later, because even though I kept my regular shoes, it took me a weird amount of time to figure out *sock garters*.) Also, I had promised myself I wasn't going to wear any stupid hats but was actually a little disappointed when there wasn't one in the closet. I did find a pipe, but it smelled like absolute *ass*, which quickly dispelled any notions I might have had of puffing on it thoughtfully as I pondered shit. Even so, I was feeling Sherlock Holmesy as *all fuck*.

I found Watson downstairs, sitting in a room with a woman dressed like she was attending a funeral. He was engaging in small talk and doing his level best to make her feel comfortable but was clearly losing that particular battle.

"Good morning, madam," I said. I decided to mimic Watson's polite 1800s speech patterns, partly because it seemed to fit my outfit and the decor and partly because it was just kind of fun. "My name is Sherlock Holmes—I see that you've already met my associate." Which was good because I realized that I couldn't remember what Watson's first name was supposed to be. James? *John?* That couldn't be right—I had just spent an entire book constantly forgetting that John was supposed to be *my own* name.

The woman was shivering. "Uh, do you want to maybe sit over by the fire?" I asked. My weak attempt at Victorian English was *already* falling to

shit, but I wasn't too worried about it. "Might we get you, like, a cup of coffee or something?"

"It is not cold which makes me shiver," she said in a low voice. She did move closer to the fireplace, though. "It is fear, Mr. Holmes. It is *terror*."

She lifted her veil as she spoke, and underneath it, she certainly did look timid and frail. She was hot forty (if hot forty was a thing in Victorian England) or possibly prematurely gray thirty. She looked like she could use a hearty breakfast and a hug and was holding a slip of paper in one glove that literally said "train ticket."

"So you came in by train, huh?" I was just trying to make small talk, but she gasped and stared at me like I was a *wizard*. Watson began scribbling furiously in a little notebook, no doubt noting my amazing powers of observation. The yokels, it seemed, weren't going to be terribly hard to impress in this book. Which was good news for me.

"You are perfectly correct—I came in by the first train to Waterloo," she said. "Sir, I can stand this strain no longer. I shall go *mad* if it continues. I have no one to turn to but have heard of you, Mr. Holmes, from Mrs. Farintosh, whom you helped in the hour of her sore need."

"Sure, Mrs. Farintosh," I said. I turned to Watson. "You remember Mrs. Farintosh, don't you?"

"I do not," he said. "Perhaps that particular case was before my time." Crap. Well, so much for my clever attempt to get him to tell me whatever the fuck I was supposed to already know about Mrs. Farintosh.

"Oh, sir," the woman said, "do you not think you could help me too and at least shed a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds me? At present it is out of my power to reward you for your services, but in a month, I shall be married with the control of my own income. And then at least, you shall not find me ungrateful."

Okay, that last part *might* have been a come-on—I shot a glance at Watson, who raised one eyebrow. Also, I didn't even know what the dense darkness surrounding her *was*, but I was pretty sure that whoever was *currently* in control of her income did it.

BOOM. SOLVED. NEXT CLIENT, PLEASE.

"Let me assure you that I'll devote every bit as much care to your case as I did to your friend's," I said. "And don't even worry about the money." Sherlock Holmes didn't seem to be hurting for cash from what I could tell, and the last thing I wanted was for the whole thing to drag on while she

went and figured out her finances. I gave her my best reassuring gaze (who knows what it looked like to her—reassuring wasn't exactly one of my goto expressions). "Now, tell me everything."

"Alas!" she said. "The very horror of my situation lies in the fact that my fears are so vague, and my suspicions depend so entirely upon small points, which might seem trivial to another. But I have heard, Mr. Holmes, that you can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart. You may advise me how to walk amid the dangers which encompass me."

She went on to tell me her name was Helen Stoner, and she lived with her stepfather, who was the last survivor of one of the Roylotts of Stoke Moran, which I guess was supposed to mean something to me. The family apparently used to be super rich, but squandered it all long ago, so all her stepfather had was a rotting, 200-year-old house and a medical degree that he got after running off to India or somewhere.

The truth is, I was having trouble paying attention because, while she was talking, someone brought in a tray of coffee (the aforementioned Mrs. Hudson? Some random servant? The other two completely ignored her, so I didn't want to make a whole thing out of it), and OH MY GOD, COFFEE. I didn't even normally *drink* that much coffee, and when I did it was ninety percent foamed milk and caramel and other bullshit. But when you haven't had any coffee at all in *months*, just the tiniest sip washes over you like a goddamn *sunrise*—like a part of you that you didn't even know was missing until it returns, and all you can do is bask in the warm, caffeinated embrace of unconditional love.

No one else made a move on it, so I drank all three cups.

"Our stepfather established a large practice in Calcutta," Helen was saying. "In a fit of anger, however, he beat his native butler to death and narrowly escaped a capital sentence."

I almost spit a mouthful of coffee on her. "Wait, what? He beat his butler to death?"

"Yes. As it was, he suffered a long term of imprisonment, and afterwards returned to England a morose and disappointed man."

Sure, lengthy prison sentences FOR MURDER will do that to you. "And your stepdad is the person who controls your money until you get married, I assume?"

"Why, yes. My mother was the widow of a Major-General of the Bengal Artillery, and married him well before the incident, when my twin sister Julia and I were only two years old. She had a considerable sum of money—not less than a thousand pounds a year—and this she bequeathed to Dr. Roylott while we resided with him, with a provision that a certain annual sum should be allowed to each of us in the event of our marriage."

I was almost afraid to ask what happened to the mom, but fortunately I didn't have to.

"Shortly after our return to England, my mother died—she was killed eight years ago in a railway accident." So, *definitely* pushed in front of a train then. "Dr. Roylott abandoned his attempts to establish his practice in London and took us to live with him in the old ancestral house at Stoke Moran. The money which my mother had left was enough for all our wants, and there seemed to be no obstacle to our happiness."

It did sound fucking idyllic.

"But a terrible change came over our stepfather about this time," she continued. "Instead of making friends and exchanging visits with our neighbors, who had at first been overjoyed to see a Roylott of Stoke Moran back in the old family seat, he shut himself up in his house and seldom came out save to indulge in ferocious quarrels with whomever might cross his path."

Basically, the stepdad had become an angry, violent hermit, always getting into fights and throwing blacksmiths into rivers and what have you. The entire town was afraid of him.

"He has no friends at all save the wandering gypsies"—okay, *racist*—"and he gives these vagabonds leave to encamp upon the few acres of bramble-covered land which represent the family estate, accepting in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end. He also has a passion for Indian animals, which are sent over to him by a correspondent, and he has at this moment a cheetah and a baboon, which wander freely over his grounds and are feared by the villagers almost as much as their master."

Fuck—did it have to be a baboon? The cheetah I was fine with, but when I was eight years old, I had somehow seen the worst horror movie ever on TV (latchkey kids FTW), about a baboon that terrorized a community college science lab. It wasn't even a giant baboon or a radioactive baboon or anything—it was just a really angry regular baboon, and that shit scarred me for life. You don't even know. They have canine

teeth longer than a lion's! More than a hundred people die from baboon attacks every year!

Seriously, *fuck* those creepy little simian bastards.

"You can imagine from what I say that my poor sister Julia and I had no great pleasure in our lives," Helen continued. "No servant would stay with us, and for a long time, we did all the work of the house. She was but thirty at the time of her death, yet her hair had already begun to whiten, even as mine has."

"So your sister's dead?" Ugh. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. I mean, it's not a mystery unless you've got a fucking *murder*, right?

"She died just two years ago, and it is of her death that I wish to speak to you. You can understand that, living the life which I have described, we were little likely to see anyone of our own age and position. However, Julia went to our Aunt's house at Christmas two years ago and met there a halfpay major of marines, to whom she became engaged. My stepfather learned of the engagement when my sister returned, and offered no objection to the marriage, but within a fortnight of the day which had been fixed for the wedding, the terrible event occurred."

Let me guess: *pushed in front of a train*? I didn't say that out loud, of course. We were talking about the woman's *dead twin*, after all. Also, what I usually did when I got roped into watching a mystery or whatever was to shout out my constantly evolving theories about the killer as the show went on, but I was trying to resist the temptation. It probably wouldn't be a great look for THE WORLD'S GREATEST DETECTIVE.

Which reminded me, I was supposed to *solve* this stupid thing. The mysterious woman brought in another tray of coffee—wait, could SHE be the killer? No, that didn't make any sense. I was definitely getting jittery from all the caffeine, though. I told her to go ahead and leave the whole pot.

"Go ahead and be as specific as you can with the details," I said.

"It is easy for me to be so, for every event of that dreadful time is seared into my memory. The manor house is, as I have already said, very old, and only one wing is now inhabited. The bedrooms in this wing are on the ground floor— the first is Dr. Roylott's, the second my sister's, and the third my own. They all open out into the same corridor. Do I make myself plain?"

"Utterly." Okay, when I said as specific as possible, I didn't mean to GIVE ME THE FUCKING FLOOR PLAN. Suddenly I was second

guessing myself, though. Was all this detail *important*? Was the solution to this mystery going to hinge on remembering *which bedrooms were next to each other*? Fortunately, my mind was focused like a goddamned laser beam (although my fingers were also shaking a little, and I had to resist the urge to start drumming on the coffee table).

"That fatal night, Dr. Roylott had gone to his room early," Helen said, "though we knew that he had not retired to rest, for my sister was troubled by the smell of the strong Indian cigars which it was his custom to smoke. She left her room, therefore, and came into mine, where she sat for some time, chatting about her approaching wedding. At eleven o'clock she rose to leave me but paused at the door and looked back."

Helen described a conversation she'd had with her sister about hearing someone whistle in the dead of night. In fact, Julia had heard whistling for several nights in a row, but Helen, being a sounder sleeper, never did. They chalked it up to generic Romani racism shit and called it good.

(Although I guess the g-word in Victorian England actually referred to a whole bunch of different groups including Romani and, like, Irish Travellers and stuff? Whatever—Irish people weren't even white yet in the 1800s, so it's not like that makes it *less* racist.)

"She smiled back at me," Helen said, "closed my door, and a few moments later, I heard her key turn in the lock."

"Did you always lock yourselves in at night? Both of you?"

"Always."

"Because...?" I mean, the answer was *probably* because they were terrified of their stepfather, but I had to ask.

"I think that I mentioned that the doctor kept *a cheetah and a baboon*?" For a woman who looked as freaked out as she did, there was a surprising amount of sauce in her tone. Still. If I'd been in her shoes, I'd have probably wedged the goddamned wardrobe in front of the door. Fucking *baboons* and shit.

"I could not sleep that night. My sister and I, you will recollect, were twins, and you know how subtle are the links which bind two souls which are so closely allied. It was a wild night. The wind was howling outside, and the rain was beating and splashing against the windows."

Dark and stormy night. Check. "Suddenly, amid all the hubbub of the gale, there burst forth the wild scream of a terrified woman. I knew that it was my sister. I sprang from my bed, wrapped a shawl round me, and

rushed into the corridor. As I opened my door, I seemed to hear a low whistle, such as my sister described, and a few moments later a clanging sound, as if a mass of metal had fallen."

UH OH, SHIT JUST GOT REAL. "As I ran down the passage, my sister's door was unlocked and revolved slowly upon its hinges. I stared at it, horror-stricken, not knowing what was about to issue from it. By the light of the corridor lamp, I saw my sister appear at the opening, her face blanched with terror, her hands groping for help, her whole figure swaying to and fro like that of a drunkard."

Helen's eyes were haunted, but her voice remained steady. It was obvious that she wasn't dredging up some long-forgotten terror—she lived with these memories *daily*. "I ran to her and threw my arms round her, but at that moment her knees seemed to give way and she fell to the ground. She writhed as one who is in terrible pain, and her limbs were dreadfully convulsed. At first, I thought that she had not recognized me, but as I bent over her, she suddenly shrieked out in a voice which I shall never forget:

"Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!"

What the fuck was a *speckled band*? "There was something else which she would fain have said, and she stabbed with her finger into the air in the direction of the doctor's room, but a fresh convulsion seized her and choked her words. I rushed out, calling loudly for my stepfather, and I met him hastening from his room in his dressing-gown. When he reached my sister's side, she was unconscious, and though he poured brandy down her throat and sent for medical aid from the village, all efforts were in vain, for she slowly sank and died without having recovered her consciousness. Such was the dreadful end of my beloved sister."

Well, you know, he did try *pouring liquor down her throat*, so clearly that Calcutta Medical College degree was paying off. I asked her some questions about specifics—the noises she heard, what her sister was wearing, that kind of thing. For the record, she was in her nightgown, and holding the charred stump of a lit match. Helen also mentioned that the county coroner had asked her the same stuff.

County coroner? "And what did that guy think happened?"

"He investigated the case with great care, for Dr. Roylott's conduct had long been notorious in the county, but he was unable to find any satisfactory cause of death. The door had been fastened upon the inner side, and the windows were blocked by old-fashioned shutters with broad iron bars, which were secured every night. The walls were carefully sounded and were shown to be quite solid all round, and the flooring was also thoroughly examined, with the same result. The chimney is wide but is barred up. It is certain, therefore, that my sister was quite alone when she met her end. Besides, there were no marks of any violence upon her."

It was a *locked door mystery*. Wait, I knew this one!

"A puddle of water! Was there a *puddle of water* on the floor?" Because she was stabbed with an icicle! No, wait. There was no stab wound, plus someone still would have had to have been in the room to stab her with anything. I was getting my murder mystery clichés mixed up.

Fortunately, Helen seemed to take it as a reasonable question. "None at all. The doctors also examined her for poison but without success." Well, shit. I was stumped. I mean, it was DEFINITELY the stepfather, but apparently I was going to have to work out all the specifics. *Bleagh*.

Maybe Helen had her own theory, which I could use as a jumping-off point? "So what do YOU think she died from?"

"It is my belief that she died of pure fear and nervous shock," she said, "though what it was that frightened her I cannot imagine."

"Uh huh. And do you have any idea what the whole speckled band thing was about?"

"Sometimes I have thought that it was merely the wild talk of delirium, sometimes that it may have referred to some band of people, perhaps to these very gypsies in the plantation. The spotted handkerchiefs which so many of them wear over their heads might have suggested the strange adjective which she used."

Which sounded racist and stupid, so it was *probably* that. A big part of voyaging through literature was playing the whole "who is the author racist against this time" game, and I was putting Romani on the list for sure.

"Okay," I said. "And you said all this happened two years ago? Why come looking for help now?"

"Since that day, my life has been—until lately—lonelier than ever. A month ago, however, a dear friend, whom I have known for many years, has done me the honor to ask my hand in marriage. His name is Armitage—Percy Armitage—the second son of Mr. Armitage, of Crane Water, near Reading." I stopped her before she could delve into the entire, boring history of the Armitages of Crane Water and steered her back toward current events.

"My stepfather has offered no opposition to the match"—I'd heard that one before—"and we are to be married in the course of the spring. Two days ago, some repairs were started in the west wing of the building, and my bedroom wall has been pierced so that I have had to move into the chamber in which my sister died and to sleep in the very bed in which she slept."

Yikes.

"Imagine, then, my thrill of terror when last night, as I lay awake, thinking over her terrible fate, I suddenly heard in the silence of the night the low whistle which had been the herald of her own death. I sprang up and lit the lamp, but nothing was to be seen in the room. I was too shaken to go to bed again, however, so I dressed, and as soon as it was daylight, I slipped down, got a dog-cart at the Crown Inn, which is opposite, and drove to Leatherhead from whence I have come on this morning with the one object of seeing you and asking your advice."

Wait, *dog-cart*? Like, *a cart pulled by dogs*? FOCUS, ARABELLA. "Is that everything? Are you leaving anything out?"

"Nothing at all."

Uh-huh. "Something about your stepfather, maybe?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

I acted on a hunch. "Madam, give me your hand."

She put her palm in mine, and I peeled the long glove back from her forearm, revealing bruises in the pattern of four enormous fingers and an enormous thumb.

She blushed hard and pulled the glove back over her injured wrist. "He is a hard man," she said, "and perhaps he hardly knows his own strength."

If he was anything like a billion abusive assholes in modern times, I was pretty sure that fucker knew *exactly* how much strength it took to beat up his stepdaughter. As far as the whole mystery thing went, though, I wasn't at all sure what was supposed to come next. I shot a look at Watson, but he was busy writing in his notebook (shit, was I supposed to be *taking notes*?)

Okay, what would Sherlock Holmes do at this point in the story? I had never actually read any Sherlock Holmes, and the one episode I saw of the TV show was mostly about Watson's *wedding*, so that was no help. As far as I knew, though, he would probably 1) wear a stupid hat, 2) smoke a stupid pipe, and 3) look at a bunch of shit with his stupid magnifying glass.

Ugh. Fine.

"So is there a time we can come out to your ancestral home and look the place over when your asshole stepfather won't be there?"

Watson made an audible gasp at my language, but Helen seemed to take it in stride. "As it happens, he spoke of coming into town today upon some most important business. It is probable that he will be away all day, and that there would be nothing to disturb you. We have a housekeeper now, but she is old and foolish, and I could easily get her out of the way."

Alrighty, then. "You up for a trip, Watson?"

"By all means."

"Then today it is." At least I wouldn't have to dick around for a week before the plot got moving—that part was always *the worst* in these things. "You want to stick around? I feel like if we wait here long enough, that coffee lady will probably bring breakfast."

"I have one or two things which I would wish to do now that I am in town," she said. "But I shall return by the twelve o'clock train, so as to be there in time for your coming. My heart is lightened already since I have confided my trouble to you. I shall look forward to seeing you again this afternoon."

She dropped her thick, black funeral veil over her face and scooted out the door.

PART III.

THE OBVIOUS MURDERER SHOWS UP TO PROVE HE'S AN ASSHOLE, JUST IN CASE YOU WEREN'T 100% SURE.

"Okay, Watson," I said as soon as the door shut behind her. "What do you think of all this?"

"It seems to me to be a most dark and sinister business."

He wasn't wrong. We went over Helen's story, trying to think of anything we might have missed. A locked room with no access through the door, windows, or chimney. An abusive stepfather who literally *did prison time for murder* and would lose at least a chunk of his income if either daughter got married. That part was so obvious that it *had* to be a red herring, though, right? I mean, they were playing up the evil, violent stepfather angle *hard*. We also had strange whistling noises at night, a loud clanging sound right before the murder, and miscellaneous freeloaders roaming the grounds, plus a cheetah and a baboon.

At that point, for what it's worth, my money was on the *baboon*.

It looked like there was nothing to do but head out to Stoke Moran on the afternoon train. Before I had the chance to investigate that whole breakfast situation, though, someone threw the door open so hard that it almost burst from its hinges. Framed there was some enormous asshole in a top hat and frock coat, holding a bent cane-thing with a leather strap on the end. His face was all wrinkly and sun bleached, and his deep-set eyes and thin nose made him look like a vulture, if a vulture was so big it filled your entire doorway and clearly wanted to choke you to death with its bare hands.

"Which of you is Holmes?" he demanded.

"That's me," I said. "And you are...?"

"I am Dr. Grimesby Roylott, of Stoke Moran."

Nice! Say what you will about the guy who wrote Sherlock Holmes, but that guy did NOT waste time getting his plots moving. Also, I had just spent like two solid months fighting *fifteen-foot-tall Martians with tusks*, and I was not afraid of this beady-eyed fucker in the *slightest*.

"What can I do for you, buddy?"

"Do not take that tone with me," he said. "My stepdaughter has been here. I have traced her. What has she been saying to you?"

"Wow, it's super cold out there—I think there's still coffee if you want any."

His face shook. "What has she been saying to you!?"

"I have to warn you, it's pretty strong, though. Look at my hand! I've got the caffeine jitters something crazy."

I held a hand out in front of him, which was steady as a rock.

His color went from red to purple. "You put me off, do you?" He took a step forward, shaking his cane thing, which I decided was maybe used for whipping horses? "I know you, you scoundrel! I have heard of you before. You are Holmes, the meddler. Holmes, the busybody! Holmes, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office!"

I had no idea what a jack-in-office was, but I was kind of delighted at the idea that I was famous in Victorian dirtbag circles. Like, this guy spent his evenings drinking at the pub with his abusive asshole crew, shaking his fist at that bastard who treats our wives and daughters like actual human beings, Sherlock Holmes.

"Don't you dare to meddle with my affairs," he said. "I know that Miss Stoner has been here. I traced her! I am a dangerous man to fall foul of!"

He grabbed the poker from the fireplace and bent it into a curve with his huge hands. "See that you keep yourself *out of my grip*," he snarled, hurling the twisted poker into the fireplace and turning to storm out of the room.

For the record, I also had *superhuman strength* back on Mars. On a whim, I snatched the poker from the fireplace before it got hot, and with a quick jerk straightened it right back out again. Huh. Either Sherlock Holmes was kind of a badass or some of my Warlord of Mars strength had carried over into this book. Or iron pokers were just really shoddily made in

Victorian times, I guess. Regardless, though, I was confident that I could take Roylott McVultureface if push came to shove.

Of course, there was a very real possibility that this guy was going to *murder Helen on the streets* if he caught up with her before she made it back home. I turned to Watson. "So do we go have that fucker arrested *right now*? Is anything he's done so far, like, *illegal*?"

Watson stammered a bit at the unexpected swearing—Sherlock Holmes, apparently, didn't curse like a fifteen-year-old girl—but finally regained his composure. "You like the stepfather for our killer, then? Well, he certainly does seem the type. But *surely* we must examine the evidence and build a proper case before calling in Scotland Yard, mustn't we?"

Ugh. He was right. Sherlock Holmes wasn't known as literature's greatest Guy Who Just Had People Arrested Because They Obviously Did It, Without Even Bothering To Solve The Mystery. Also, watching my genius at work was clearly Watson's favorite part, and I couldn't bear to break his little heart by trying to shortcut the whole process.

Stoke Moran, here we come. Wait, that place wasn't out in the *Baskervilles*, was it? Like, were there going to be *spooky ghost dogs* in this thing?

Hmmm. With any luck, they'd eat that goddamn baboon.

Watson had seemed convinced that I would head promptly downtown to look up public records or some bullshit, so I sent him to do it for me while I focused on bathing and breakfast sausages. He was positively giddy that I was letting him help, too—it was *adorable*. It was early afternoon when he returned with a bunch of numbers scribbled on a sheet of blue paper.

"I have seen the will of the deceased wife," he said. "It appears to me that the total income, 1,100 pounds at the time of the wife's death, is now not more than 750 pounds due to the fall in agricultural prices."

Watson had *really* put his back into this one, and now I actually felt a little bad for sending him off to do busywork. "Each daughter could claim an income of 250 pounds in case of marriage," he continued, "and therefore if both had married, the doctor would have been reduced to a mere pittance. Even one of them would cripple him to a very real extent."

He held out the paper so that I could check his work, but it just looked like a bunch of scribbles to me.

"Uh, well spotted, old friend." He was beaming now. Also, I now remembered that according to Madeline, the phrase "old friend" was always code for "we used to bone" in these things.

So we packed up to head out for the train station (if there *were* carts pulled by dogs in this town, you can bet your ass I was going to take one to get there).

Watson caught my eye on our way to the front door. "Should I bring my revolver?"

"Yeah, go ahead." I didn't *think* Sherlock Holmes went around shooting people a ton, but it never hurt to play it safe.

Plus, there was the fucking baboon to worry about.

PART IV.

SHERLOCK HOLMESING THE SHIT OUT OF THIS MOTHERFUCKER.

The cab that took us to the station was pulled by a regular, boring horse, as was the one that took us from the train out to Murder Doctor's ancestral home. In fact, I didn't see dogs pulling any carts *anywhere*, and I felt pretty stupid asking about it, so I just let it go. It was a good four or five miles through the charming country lanes, the blue sky was dotted with fleecy clouds, and the landscape was charming as all living hell. I grew up in Calabasas, California, bored to tears by the relentlessly perfect weather, but after a couple of months in a bleak, Martian desert, I could get *used* to crap like this.

I'd noticed that Watson walked with a slight limp as we made our way to the carriage, but it certainly didn't seem to dampen his enthusiasm at all. In fact, that guy seemed jaunty as all hell.

"I know the circumstances of our investigation are dire," he said. "A woman is dead, after all. But I nevertheless find myself quite caught up in the excitement."

I had to admit that his earnestness was endearing. Also, I couldn't stop looking at his mustache for some reason. It looked so soft—did he use *conditioner* on that thing? Did he comb it with a little brush? He definitely looked—and smelled—like he put a lot of effort into his morning grooming ritual.

Oh, *shit*. Was I developing a crush on *Dr. fucking Watson*?

Fortunately, we arrived at our destination before I had time to unpack the implications of *that* little bombshell. "Up yonder is Stoke Moran," the driver said, "the house of Dr. Grimesby Roylott. Although what business you have with the likes of *him* I can't imagine." Uh oh—was this guy going to go blabbing all over town about two mysterious city weirdos who had come to visit the dread doctor? That seemed like the kind of gossip that would get Helen murdered if it got around to her stepdad.

"Uh, we're *architects*," I said. Architect was the most made-up job *ever*—like ninety percent of assholes in romantic comedies or whatever were architects, even though the job DID NOT ACTUALLY EXIST in real life. It was all I could come up with on the spot, though.

The cab driver seemed to buy into it. "Finally fixing the place up, is he? That's all well enough, I suppose. If you want to get to the house, you'll find it shorter to take the foot path over the fields. There it is, where the lady is walking."

Sure as hell, there was Helen Stoner, marching up the path toward the busted-up old mansion. We paid the guy and hurried to catch up with her, climbing over a little wooden stair thing built into the low stone wall around the estate. She was overjoyed to see us, and I have to admit I was relieved that she hadn't gotten murdered yet.

"I have been waiting so eagerly for you!" she said. "All has turned out splendidly—Dr. Roylott has gone to town, and it is unlikely that he will be back before evening."

"Yeah, we kind of ran into him this morning."

"Good heavens!" Her face fell. "He has followed me, then."

"Yup."

"He is so cunning that I never know when I am safe from him! What will he say when he returns?"

"Ah, but he must guard *himself*," Watson said in a reassuring tone. "For he may find that there is someone more cunning than himself on his track."

"We'll get you checked into a motel or something if it comes down to that," I said. Based on the look she gave me, motels were *clearly* not a thing yet. "Or drive you out to your aunt's house, maybe? For now, though, let's have a look at the place."

The building was stone and largely covered in moss with the whole lefthand side pretty much trashed (windows shattered and boarded up, roof partly caved in—my first thought was BABOON RAMPAGE, but I suppose it might have been the normal ravages of poverty and time). The right-hand wing was in much better shape and looked more or less inhabitable. There was a bit of scaffolding erected outside one of the windows, but it didn't look like any actual work was being done there.

"That's your old room, I guess?" I said. "The one you had to move out of because of all the urgent construction?"

"Exactly so," Helen said. "I believe that it was an excuse to move me into the middle room."

The windows had shutters on them that could be barred from the inside. "Do me a favor and go lock up the window in your bedroom," I said. I didn't spend a ton of time in my everyday life solving mysteries or whatever, but I figured I might as well start with the obvious stuff and work from there. I beat the crap out of those shutters, but they didn't budge. Either my Martian super strength had completely faded, or they were built a lot more sturdily than the average fireplace poker.

We moved into the dead sister's room, and it seemed pretty secure from the inside as well. The chimney was probably too narrow for a person to climb down—but what about a baboon? Helen assured me that the coroner had inspected it fully and pronounced it secure. Part of me wanted to double check, just to make sure it wasn't accessible by a MONKEY TRAINED TO USE A SCREWDRIVER, but getting all the way up to the roof seemed like a giant pain in the ass. I did make a big show of combing the entire room over with my magnifying glass, but it just looked like a bunch of old 1800s shit to me.

"What's that rope for?" It was hanging from the ceiling above the bed, with a little tassel on the end resting on one of the pillows. Which seemed like kind of a weird place to hang a rope. It also looked newer than the rest of the stuff.

"The bell rope?" Helen asked. "It rings in the housekeeper's room."

"How long has it been there?"

"Only a couple of years. Although I never use it, nor did my sister as far as I ever heard. We would always get what we wanted for ourselves."

I gave it a yank, but didn't hear any bell. In fact, when I looked into the hole in the ceiling, right above an air vent thing, I could see that the rope was just tied to a hook.

"Pretty sure that thing's fake." The hole for it was *way* too small for a baboon to fit through, though, and the vent seemed pretty secure. Although it was kind of weird that it had been built into the wall that separated this

room from the stepfather's, rather than, I don't know, OUTSIDE WHERE ALL THE FRESH AIR WAS.

We took the investigation next door—Roylott's room was larger than Helen's but not particularly fancy. There was a big, iron safe against the wall with the air vent.

"What's in the safe?"

"My stepfather's papers," Helen said. "I saw inside only once, some years ago."

"So there's not, like, *a cat* in there or something?"

"No! What a strange idea!"

"There's a *saucer of milk* on top of it. Do you even have a cat?"

"Well, I believe I mentioned *the cheetah*." The side-eye she gave me was flat-out magnificent.

I examined the room while the others waited patiently, Watson scribbling away in his notebook the entire time. The only thing that looked weird to me was a stick thing hanging from one corner of the bed, with a cord attached to one end, tied into a loop. But for all I knew, everybody had one of those in their bedroom in this century.

"What do you make of that, Watson?" I asked all casually.

"It's a common enough dog lash," he said. Dog lash! Sure! For whipping your dogs, PROBABLY so they'll pull you in a CART, which is TOTALLY NORMAL. "But I don't know why it should be tied at the end."

Huh, well, I guess this was the part where I'd let the others assume I'd worked out an intricate theory about how the murder went down, even though the truth was that I had absolutely no fucking idea. The whole mystery-solving thing, I decided, was dumb, and I hated it.

"Okay, I've seen enough," I said. Because what I did have was a *plan*. We'd hide out in Helen's murder room and catch whoever was being all threatening and whistley in the act. And whether it was Dr. Grimesby Roylott, the demon baboon, or a random assassin, I'd punch that motherfucker right in the face. Or Watson could shoot it. Either way should work out fine.

I thought we could just hide out in the room with Helen until night, but she seemed scandalized by the notion, as well as terrified of what would happen if her stepfather discovered us there. So we decided to get a room up the road at a nearby inn and wait for her to flash a light in her window when the coast was clear. Then she would retire to her old room next door while we hid out in the dark, waiting to see what there was to see.

I did make her promise to fake a headache and lock herself in the bedroom until then, at least. McVultureface certainly seemed like he was in a murdering mood when we saw him earlier, and even if he wasn't the killer, I didn't want Helen getting a beatdown because I worked extra hard to piss that guy off back at Baker Street.

"Mr. Holmes, I do believe you have made up your mind about this business already," Helen said. She laid her hand on my sleeve. Okay, now she was *definitely* hitting on me, right?

"Um, maybe."

"Then for pity's sake, tell me the cause of my sister's death. *At least* tell me if my own thought was correct, and she died from some sudden fright."

I might not have a clue what had actually happened, but I was reasonably sure I wasn't starring in *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Really Scared Girl*.

"We'll see what happens tonight," I said. "But whatever it is, I promise that I'll take care of it. Now go lock yourself in your bedroom before that jackhole comes home early and screws up the whole plan."

Since I was tired of trying to figure out how to describe basic, everyday concepts in 1800s England-ish, I let Watson handle our accommodations at the inn. I don't know why I was even a little bit surprised when the room wound up having *only one* bed in it. Granted, we'd theoretically be spending most of the night in Helen's murder suite (also with one bed, I realized), but seriously. It was like the guy *knew* what kind of action the readers of Sherlock Holmes fiction were going to demand in a hundred and fifty years and was INTENTIONALLY throwing them bones.

Wait a minute—what if he *was*? Stuff like that happened time and time again on Mars—the entire planet was like the worst nude beach ever (exposed junk all over the place, all the joys of constant sand in your crotch, and no actual ocean anywhere). Had I been stuck in public domain-inspired *erotica* this entire time and not even realized it? What if the reason I couldn't find my way out of these stupid things was that I had *misunderstood the victory conditions*? I guess roping in teenagers at the mall would be an odd choice for that kind of market research, but what did I know? Weird, creepy shit happened all the time in this world.

Then again, the first book I got stuck in was *The Wizard of Oz*, and that one didn't have any sex stuff in it at all (THANK GOD). But I had *definitely* screwed up the ending of it somehow—when I skipped off whatever track I was supposed to be on, I could have easily slipped into the Voyages Through Literature adults only section. I mean, if you were developing eerily lifelike virtual reality fantasy adventures, you'd pretty much do six that were all-ages, beloved children's classics and a hundred and fifty thousand that were straight-up hardcore porn, right?

Watson, for his part, seemed to want nothing more than to pick over the day's events for any clues we might have missed and to ruminate about the ways I'd used my particular powers of observation to crack similar cases in the past. Of course, if Holmes and Watson were your bag, I suppose that sort of thing might be considered foreplay.

Right about the time the sun went down, we looked out the window to see Dr. Roylott riding up to his estate on a horse-drawn carriage. The kid who was driving it had some trouble with the heavy iron gates, and the doctor shook his clenched fists and howled in fury at him.

I had a sudden pang of worry for Helen. "You know, Watson, shit might get pretty real tonight. You're free to stay here at the inn if you'd rather." His face went red, but I realized it was probably the swearing—I had to remember to keep it to a minimum around his sensitive ears.

"Can I be of any use to you at all?"

Well, he *did* have that revolver. "Sure, probably."

"Then I shall certainly come."

Dude, *you're killing me*. Watson had about a million more questions about the bell rope and air vent in Helen's room, but by that point, I needed a break from it all. I told him I needed quiet to organize all my geniusthoughts, and we waited on Helen's signal in silence.

It was about eleven o'clock when the light finally shone out from Stoke Moran. We chatted with the inn's proprietor on our way out, explaining that we might not be back until morning (that guy DEFINITELY thought we were headed back to our wives after using his guest room to bang all evening, but whatever).

Fortunately, Helen left her window light on, and there were plenty of gaps in the ancient stone fence, so we were actively trespassing in no time. We had just made it to the bedroom window when the distorted figure of a hideous demon child darted out from a bush, threw itself on the grass with writhing limbs and then bolted away across the lawn.

"JESUS!" I yelled. "THE FUCKING BABOON! Give me a heart attack, why don't you?"

"Shhhhhhh!" Helen popped her head out of the dark window in the room next to the murder suite—apparently she had already moved over there to keep out of our way. She put a finger in front of her lips and pointed frantically toward the far window, where her stepfather would theoretically be sleeping.

Oh, right. That guy. Well, there was nothing I could do about it now. Hopefully if he heard my outburst he'd just blame it on his outdoor guests. We hadn't actually run across any yet, but if bands of Romani folks really did camp out on the grounds, you had to imagine that random fits of baboon-related screaming were not uncommon.

With any luck, he'd blame the loud, long clanking of me trying to figure out how the fuck to *turn off an oil lamp* on them too. I finally worked it out, and the room was plunged into darkness.

"Holmes!" Watson said in a whisper. I couldn't see where he was in the darkness, but his voice sounded close. "Surely we must sit in silence—the least sound would be fatal to our plans."

I felt around for the bed and sat down on the edge of it. "Yeah," I whispered back. "Do me a favor, though, and don't fall asleep. Also, maybe grab that gun?"

I heard the sound of something heavy being placed very gently on the table. I had to admit—for all my confidence and bluster, that whole thing with the baboon had shaken me up a bit, and I was *not* looking forward to waiting for hours in the darkness for the creepy little monster to come back through the vents to finish the job. (And yeah, I know I already said the vents were screwed on tight, but STILL.) I found a box of matches in Holmes's pocket and kept one handy, ready to strike at any moment.

The night stretched on and on, punctuated every fifteen minutes by the faraway chimes of some clock tower or whatever. Every once in a while I'd hear a bird making sounds in the darkness, and sometime between 12:30 and 12:45, I nearly shit my pants when a low, catlike growl came from right outside our window. I had almost forgotten about *the fucking cheetah*. It must have moved along, though, because after that one time we didn't hear it again.

The chimes struck one o'clock, then two, then three. I was driving myself crazy waiting for something to happen. Occasionally I'd hear the very soft sound of Watson shifting in his chair at the table close by.

Maybe it was the silence or the darkness or—I don't know—the slow drain of adrenaline that happens when fear slowly recedes into boredom, but I *kind of* wanted to kiss him.

I had my first real kiss on Mars, just about a week ago (by my time, at least—there was a whole 9-year fast forward thing plus whatever time jump happened in between John Carter and Sherlock Holmes in there too). It was unexpected and awkward, with this Air Scout guy I had a huge crush on, and it was followed by a whole lot of smooching with a Martian princess who basically worshipped the ground I walked on (and who was a *much* better kisser than the first guy). Now, after fifteen years of life completely makeout-free, it was like a dam had burst, and I pretty much wanted to do it *all the time*.

Watson was WAY too old for me, and when he looked at me he saw *Sherlock fucking Holmes*, which made any romantic entanglement between us problematic on like six different levels. *The way* he looked at me, though —maybe that gaze was just manly camaraderie and I was reading way too much into it, but I saw the same sort of unconditional love there that had finally broken down my resistance to Dejah Thoris. There were subtle differences, though—as much smooching as I had done on Mars, it always felt harmless. It was plenty fun and all, but I didn't have to worry about it *leading* anywhere. Something told me that if I reached out now, in the darkness, it could lead *everywhere*.

I stood up from the bedside slowly without making a sound. So much about this was wrong. Was Watson *married* at this point in the stories? If my lips met his, would I be stealing away his first kiss with the *real* Sherlock? Also, if I thought about that kind of stuff before doing something I was definitely going to do anyway, did it make me a better person or a *worse* one? I inched forward until my legs brushed against the table.

I expected a flinch of surprise when my fingers found the back of his hand, but it was as if he was waiting for me. He turned his palm up and closed his fingers over mine. I leaned forward in the darkness to where those firm, gentle, mustache-covered lips must be—

And heard a clank of metal from the next room, followed by a rustling noise on the bedsheets behind me.

Baboon! I still had that match in my other hand, THANK GOD, and I struck it on the table. There, above the bed, slithering down the bell rope onto a pillow *right where I had been sitting* was a scaly, stripey, terrifyingly long fucking *jungle snake*. This is where my recent Warlording experience served me well too because a couple of months ago I probably would have just screamed. Instead, I picked up a wooden chair and threw it against the wall behind the headboard, where it broke into three different pieces and sent the serpent slithering right back up into its ceiling hole.

A *snake*? How was I supposed to guess *that* when nobody even told me about any fucking snake? *Because it lived in the safe next door*, I realized, *drinking saucers of milk like a housecat*. The clanking sound Helen and her sister heard was the safe door opening and closing. But what was the whistling?

The whistling was McVultureface calling the trained snake back to him on all the nights when it came down the rope but didn't randomly decide to poison one of his stepdaughters to death. It was a fate that I might have quite literally just have escaped thanks to an uncharacteristic lack of impulse control.

"By God, Holmes, what is it?" Watson said. "The glare of your match burned my eyes so brightly that I couldn't make out what—"

He was cut off by a horrible scream from Roylott's room—a hoarse, deep cry that mingled pain, fear, and anger all together in one dreadful shriek. It was so loud it must have woken up the whole damn town.

I waited patiently until the last echoes of it died away into the silence. Because *fuck that quy*.

This time I had Watson figure the lamp out, and we met Helen, aghast, in the hallway. After assuring her that it was all over, I knocked briefly on the door at the end of the hall, and Watson gripped his pistol tightly as I pushed it open. Roylott sat dead in a wooden chair with that dog lash from the previous day resting on his lap, and a yellow band with brown speckles wrapped tightly around his forehead.

"There's your speckled band," I said. It moved as I took a step toward it, of course, but I grabbed the lash from the dead guy's lap and got the looped cord around the reptile's neck, twisting the cord tight and dragging it, at arm's length, into the open safe.

Jesus, that asshole kept that thing in there, in secret, for TWO YEARS? I guess you could add animal cruelty to, you know, *all the murders*.

PART V.

VICTORY DANCE, PLUS A TORNADO AND JUNK.

With that, the job was done. And if Helen was upset at the sight of her stepfather's newly minted corpse, she certainly got over it quickly. We agreed to give her a ride out to her aunt's house the next day and to hit up the police station along the way since whatever awful century this was seemed to predate telephones.

Watson made no mention of *whatever* it was that almost happened between us before all the action. "However did you deduce that a *snake* was the culprit?" he asked as we lounged on the front porch, waiting for dawn.

"Are you kidding? The fake rope thing? The weird vent placement? The doctor's inordinate fondness for jungle creatures? Fucking *elementary*, man."

He seemed to be getting used to my newfound potty mouth. "I suppose it explains why the bed was bolted to the floor as well," he mused. "So that it could never be moved from its position beneath the bell rope, and the serpent might always find its sleeping mark."

Shit, I hadn't even *noticed* that the bed was bolted down. Well, whatever. I had basically just *killed a guy with a snake*. I was the best Sherlock Holmes *ever*.

Watson went inside to check on Helen, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Most of those were focused on whatever the fuck I was supposed to do in Victorian London now—I had no idea if that whole speckled band clusterfuck was just the opening section of some bigger, deeper mystery or if the Sherlock Holmes books were short story collections or whatever, and I had like ten more of these things to get through.

A sharp, sudden wind whipped up around me, so I turned up my collar and considered following Watson into the big, shitty stone mansion. That's when I spotted it, though—a dark, smallish, whirling *tornado* charging right up the driveway, directly toward me.

When I first agreed to let them transport me to the land of Oz in that stupid mall store (under some pretty false fucking pretenses, I might add), it was a surprise cyclone inside a neon booth that brought me there. Then another one took me to Mars, and even though I had mostly suffocated to death at the end of that particular shit show, I felt the winds again as I lost consciousness before winding up here.

As the maelstrom whirled around me, I caught a glimpse of neon flashing inside the twister.

FUCK, YEAH. I had done it! In record time! I had solved that stupid case in *less than a day*, and this time I was leaving on my own terms, one hundred percent intentionally, and not even *slightly* dead.

"Take me to Calabasas, fuckers!" I yelled into the wind as the tornado swept me up. "Goddamnit, bring me HOME!"

* * *

I awoke with a shock—not gently stirring from sleep the way I had done at the beginning of three different stories so far but with a jolt, blinking frantically under the harsh sun. I fell to my knees, and I was either dizzy as fuck or the rough, wooden floor was pitching violently beneath me. I wasn't alone either—bodies were milling about in seeming panic, and the harsh, salty air stung my face as my eyes slowly adjusted to a vast expanse of blue sea and sky.

I was on a boat. Motherfucker.

Even worse, I realized that the sleeves that were barely protecting me from the harsh ocean breeze were made of *tweed*. My regular clothes were still back in a hamper in 1800s London, and whatever this new nightmare was, I was going to have to endure it wearing *Sherlock Holmes's clothes*, fucking sock garters and all.

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO

Leagues BELOW

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS

TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES, FUTHERMUCKERS



FROM THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY LEWIS PAGE MERCIER



IN MEMORY OF ED YOUNGMARK.

Maybe we never quite saw eye to eye but my last words to you were of forgiveness and those were the ones that stuck.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

We've long insisted that Arabella Grimsbro curses like a sailor, but since this entire adventure takes place at sea, it should be noted that even the motley, multinational crew of submarine veterans she encountered on her journey was a bit shocked by the coarseness of her language.

For those keeping score, the word "fuck" appears 128 times in this manuscript. Thus, there are slightly fewer fucks than she used to describe her various adventures on Mars (147), but still more than she saw fit to include in her original trip to Oz (76, though to be fair, that particular tale was theoretically intended for children).

Enjoy.

INTRODUCTION.

Jules Verne was thoughtful enough to skip the introduction when writing *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which is nice because it saves me the trouble of explaining to you how stupid that introduction surely would have been. This particular book also doesn't appear to have been notably *racist*, as far as I can tell, so he gets points for that.

Of course, he was also French, which means it's entirely possible that I just don't have the cultural touchstones to *see* the racism as clearly as I did with the American authors. But considering that the last guy bragged about how much HIS SLAVES LOVED HIM, and the guy before him LITERALLY ADVOCATED GENOCIDE, I'm going to go ahead and call my ignorance bliss and just move the fuck on.

The gender issues, however... not so much. To say there aren't any female characters in *Twenty Thousand Leagues* is a god-damned *understatement*—there are only like four or five *hints* in the entire, thickass, million-page book that even *acknowledge women exist*. One is a throwaway line where Verne mentions that giant sea creatures are the sort of thing silly religious women might believe in. Another is when Ned Land claims he used to have a girlfriend in Canada (she dumped him, shockingly). And then one of the dead people still tied to masts of a sunken ship happens to be a woman STILL CLINGING DESPERATELY TO HER ALSO-DEAD BABY.

So yeah, the only other woman I met during the entirety of my travels was a fucking corpse, thanks Jules Verne. To be honest, though, not having to constantly confront mid-1800s gender norms was... better than the alternative? Ugh. Whatever.

Oh, and by the way, if you think that dozens of sailors toiling away in close quarters for months and months at a stretch with only each other for company *might* lead to some steamy man-on-man action, YOU WOULD BE ONE HUNDRED PERCENT CORRECT. That place was like a giant,

underwater porn set, 24/7. It was as if the *actual navy* was the one depicted in the 1979 *Village People song*. You could barely open a hatch anywhere on that ship without seeing sweaty, unwashed man meat coming at you from eight different directions.

The recurring theme in these introduction things is usually that everything was dumb and pointless and taught me nothing, but... I don't know. Things got a little weird on this one. And yeah, it's easy to look at it from the outside and say I have abandonment issues or whatever, but Captain Nemo isn't my Dad, and you're not my fucking therapist, so bite me.

My name is Arabella Grimsbro, I just spent the better part of a year on a goddamn submarine, and I do not want to listen to your bullshit right now.

Prologue.

OUR STORY THIS FAR.

Here's the deal: This is the third book in a series, but if you don't want to go back and read all that *Wizard of Oz* or *Princess of Mars* nonsense (and who *would*? What human being interested in one of those novels could POSSIBLY be interested in the other?), by all means skip them. Here's everything relevant that happened in the last two volumes, so you can dive right into thrilling hundred-and-fifty-year-old submarine hijinks.

I'm Arabella and I'm fifteen (or at least I was when this whole thing started). My mom was born in Peru, and I love her to death. I also love my best friend Madeline (even though she's a giant pain in my ass sometimes), and I utterly despise pretty much every other human being who has ever lived. I was wasting time at the Calabasas Mall when some 40-ish librarian-looking woman lured me into a shop called Voyages Through Literature and told me she'd give me twenty dollars to endure whatever it was she was selling and then fill out a market research form.

This, of course, is like my third or fourth voyage through literature so far, and I'm still waiting for the twenty bucks. My first trip was to Oz (the book version, which meant there was all sorts of extra messed-up shit that wasn't in the movie), and I just about drove myself insane trying to figure out if I was in a computer simulation, or an actual magical fantasy land, or a coma-dream or who even knows what. (The final verdict: *shrug*?)

Oh, and also, all the other characters were just your normal woodsmen and tin people and lions and crud, but the Wizard was an actual dude from the regular world who had been trapped in Oz since he was a kid in the 1980s. That didn't actually come up again in book two, but it kind of does this time, so I should probably mention it.

The "wizard" asshole went kind of nuts at the end and tried to pilot his stupid balloon up into the stratosphere in order to, I don't know, *exact vengeance*? From the people who had trapped us both there against our

will? Rather than join him, I elected to take a swan dive into a tornado because A) I actually had a life back home worth returning to, and B) fuck that guy.

Of course, rather than taking me back to Calabasas, the tornado deposited me in the barren wastelands of Edgar Rice Burroughs' first *John Carter, Warlord of Mars* book, which is where I learned what it truly meant to suffer. That place suuuuuuuuucked. There was a lot of being held prisoner and sword murder and getting stabbed and whatnot, plus constant meals of flavorless not-quite-cheese and who-knows-maybe-it-could-be-milk for eighty million days in a row.

I did have my first real kiss there, with a super-hot Martian spy guy whose mouth, alas, was like a Dyson Cyclone. Plus a whole bunch of way more pleasant make-outs with naked princess Dejah Thoris, which I managed to get pretty goddamned used to even though I'm mostly not a lesbian.

I also IMPREGNATED HER WITH AN EGG (off camera during a nine-year fast forward) and then saved the entire planet from running out of oxygen in a big, dumb, self-sacrificial post-credits sequence.

When I woke up from that particular shit-show I was in a Sherlock Holmes thing, but I guess it was a short story, because it only lasted one night and ended after I basically killed a guy with a snake. I did manage to finish the whole thing pretty much on my own terms, though, and let the end-of-the-book tornado sweep me away, convinced that *this time* that motherfucker would take me home.

The motherfucker in question, of course, did not.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

If you haven't read the aforementioned Sherlock Holmes thing, you can download it free my signing up for Matt's author newsletter at youngmark.com. It' a 12,000 word story in which nothing terribly important to the overarching plot happens, so if you don't want to bother, feel free to skip it and dive right in to submarine adventure.

Chapter I.

AT FULL STEAM.

I don't usually get seasick, and the reason for that is because I'M NOT USUALLY ON A GOD DAMNED BOAT. In fact, until that moment, I'd never been on any kind of seafaring craft that didn't have pedals and the approximate shape of a waterfowl.

It's different, though, on a huge wooden deck that's pitching back and forth, with the sun beating down, your nostrils burning from the overpowering stench of saltwater, and big, sweaty sailor-dudes stampeding all around you. Just moments before, I had been relaxing in the pre-dawn hours of the late-1800s English countryside, and if the physical jolt of suddenly appearing here wasn't enough to make me toss my shitty English breakfast cookies, the constantly-shifting floor was doing its level best to finish the job.

In retrospect, I have no idea what made me think that tornado was going to bring me home. I suppose I had sort of tricked myself into believing that if I could solve the moronic Sherlock Holmes mystery on my own terms, I could claim victory over whatever the fuck was even happening. So when I did it in less than a day, I assumed there would be some sort of prize? Plus, you know, the third time's the charm or whatever?

It turns out that the third time is *not* the charm. The third time just answers the hypothetical question of what could possibly be worse than the vast, oceanless, scorching deserts of Mars: ALL OCEANS, ALL THE TIME, PLUS THE FLOOR NEVER STOPS MOVING AND YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO VOMIT.

At that point, I should probably mention, I vomited. I managed to hop backward a half-step as I did so I didn't get it all over my coat and pants (Sherlock Holmes' coat and pants, rather, since I had somehow managed to leave my own clothes in the previous book).

Uuuuuuuugh.

At least clearing my stomach of all its contents made me feel marginally less queasy for a moment. Okay, Arabella. Your next awful public domain adventure is apparently going to be on the open seas, so suck it up. Yeah, it blows. Also, Oz blew, and Mars blew, and late-1800s London actually blew slightly less, so of course it ended immediately, and your life is basically hell now. Five minutes of pity party, then get your ass over it. I'd been through the same bullshit too many times by then to waste much time with the whole "woe is me" routine.

The first order of business was to figure out what god-awful boat book I was even in. How many out-of-copyright ocean-faring classics could there even be? *Treasure Island*, maybe? That would have pirates, at least. It might also be some sort of Jason/Argonaut situation, although I could be wrong about that one, since to this day I have absolutely no idea what the fuck an Argonaut is. The only other possibility I could even think of was—

A booming voice rang out over the din of generic sailor noises, and my heart sank. "There's the thing in question! Astern to port!"

Every deckhand in sight rushed to the ship's railing, and I gingerly hobbled along after them. Sure enough, a mile off in the distance, some vast, shadowy creature was submerged just beneath the ocean surface, keeping pace with the ship and leaving a massive wake behind it. That's when I knew for certain, it the pit of my balled-up-fist of a stomach.

I was in *Moby* fucking *Dick*.

And yeah, I realize that the cover of this book doesn't read *Moby Futhermucking Dick*, but in all fairness, at the time I knew exactly three things about that book, just through pop culture osmosis or whatever: 1) It was insanely long and had entire chapters devoted to the finer points of whale oil and shit, 2) The main character survived at the end by clinging to Queequeg's coffin, whoever the fuck Queequeg was, and 3) Just in case a gargantuan, pale-white flesh tube wasn't already phallic enough, they LITERALLY NAMED THE WHALE "DICK."

You know what, though? Fuck it. I had spent the previous day fumbling my way through a Sherlock Holmes mystery, and although I realize *now* that it was supposed to be a short story and I actually went 2,000 words longer than Arthur Conan Doyle, at the time I was under the impression that I had finished an entire novel in record time. So if this new misery was scheduled to end with a sinking ship and me clinging for life to a box built for a dead guy, I figured I could make that happen.

I mean, Captain Whale Boner's whole deal was, like, self-destructive, single-minded obsession, right? I could get behind that.

"Batten down the hatches or whatever!" I yelled. "Either the white whale dies on this godforsaken day, or we do!" I was giving it my purplefaced, forehead-vein-popping all. "RAMMING SPEED!"

"White whale?" A big, strapping, square-jawed dudebro with a short red beard turned to face me (he might have been the same one who had spotted the behemoth a couple of minutes before, but I wasn't actually at the point where I could pick any of these guys out of a crowd.) "You've been insisting for months that our quarry was a *narwhal*."

"I believe Master is being *sly*," a charmingly snide, extremely French voice said from behind me.

I have to tell you that I wasn't in love the word "master." I turned to see a short, fit, 30-ish white guy (THANK GOD) with a sneer on his face that would make Dejah Thoris proud. Although I would later learn that he was actually Belgian, he basically looked like the Frenchiest guy I could possibly imagine.

"Before we launched our voyage, Master once insisted that Leviathan Moby Dick fantasies were the exclusive domain of the feeble-minded or silly. Having now confronted the beast, I do believe this is his clever and self-effacing way of counting himself among them."

"Conseil," the red-bearded guy said, "I don't believe I understood a single damn word of that. Whatever this monster is, though, I'ma harpoon it."

He stormed off—in search of a harpoon, presumably?—and left me with Conseil. Who I guess was some variety of *manservant*? I'd have to figure out the particulars of my relationship with him later, though, because now my mind was going a mile a minute.

If this Conseil guy had recognized my over-the-top Captain Ahab schtick, then I couldn't possibly be in *Moby Dick*. Don't get me wrong, I was super okay with that, because fuck that book, but it meant I was in a different story where they *knew about Moby Dick*. Was it some kind of half-assed *Moby Dick* whale adventure *knockoff*? Where the whale also had a *horn*? Like, *Moby Dick 2: We Heard You Like Phalluses So We Stuck An Extra Phallus On Your Phallus*.

It turned out that I actually had plenty of time to ponder the whole business, because I had been plopped down on the deck of that ship just after sunrise, and we would wind up chasing that narwhal around the ocean all goddamn day. Conseil barely left my side the entire time.

"Surely Master has found the morning's rations disagreeable," he said, leaving me to wonder, at first, if I was still "master" in this scenario. "In all the years we've traveled together, I've never known Master to suffer from *seasickness*. Is there anything he requires?"

"How about a bucket?" Being constantly addressed in the third person was irritating as hell, and it definitely wasn't *helping* with the nausea. "And a mirror, I guess."

Moments later he returned with both—having somebody at my beck and call was actually sort of nice, even if he was kind of a strange little dude. Reflected back at me in the hand mirror, I saw a completely different middle-aged white guy from the one I had woken up as yesterday. This one was a smidge younger than Sherlock Holmes—probably right about 40—and much more fleshed out (not fat, per se, but definitely on the doughy side). He wasn't unhandsome if you were into the type (for the record, I was not, but a lot of that might have been the greenish tinge and flecks of vomit). He was also wearing *different* old-timey middle-aged guy clothes than I was, which almost *broke my brain*. In previous books, I was wearing my own clothes from home, but everybody else saw whatever the main character I was replacing was supposed to be wearing. But in London, I had sent my hoodie and jeans out to be washed and put on a tweed jacket and sock garters which were now *real to me but not to the other characters because I had changed books*?

The whole thing was stupid, so I tried not to think about it too much.

After a few boring, pointless hours, the ship's actual captain—who apparently was not me, but a flustered-looking guy with a white beard-tuft on his chin that he constantly twisted up in his fingers and occasionally chewed on—shouted the phrase, "Ned Land."

At first, I assumed it was some dumb nautical term—because boat people can't just talk like regular human beings and always have to call the specific distance you are away from land a "ned" or whatever—but the redbearded harpoon guy (harpoon now in hand) reported to him at once.

"Well, Mr. Land," the Captain asked, "do you still advise putting my longboats to sea?"

"No, Sir," Red Beard (or Ned Land, I guess) replied. "Because that beast won't be caught against its will."

"Then what should we do?"

"Stoke up more steam, Sir, if you can. As for me, with your permission, I'll go perch on the bobstays under the bowsprit—" (DO YOU SEE WHAT I HAVE TO FUCKING DEAL WITH?) "—and if we can get within a harpoon length, I'll harpoon the brute."

The captain seemed content with this plan. "Go to it, Ned," he said. "Engineer! Are we up to maximum pressure?"

Some engineer guy popped his head out a hatch. "Aye, Sir. Valves charged to six and a half atmospheres."

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Charge them to ten atmospheres."

Beside me, Conseil gasped audibly, although his face betrayed no hint of concern. "A typical American order if I ever heard one," he said. "It would sound just fine during some Mississippi paddle-wheeler race." He said it conspiratorially as if neither of us were one of those American buffoons, so I figured I was probably supposed to be French or something as well.

"And if we charge up to too many atmospheres, what?" I asked. "We explode?"

"As Master wishes," was his only reply. It didn't give me any actual information, but I suppose it was good to know he was up for whatever. Like, explosion-wise.

We continued to chase the thing for several more hours, but when we managed to speed up to 18.5 whatevers, it matched our pace, at which point we'd charge more atmospheres and get up to 19.3, which also accomplished nothing. Every once in a while, Ned Land would insist that we were "overhauling it," and grip his harpoon all the tighter. His whole shaking-his-spear-and-yelling-at-a-whale thing was already pretty ridiculous and only became more so around noon when the captain got tired of the chase and wheeled out his *actual cannon*. The thing looked more like a modern-day military weapon than an old-timey pirate cannon or whatever, but I have no idea what years they invented different giant boat guns, so it didn't really help me establish the date or anything.

He offered five hundred bucks to any cannon aimer who could hit the narwhal (Ned insisted that he be given first go, but he had already earned a cool two grand by being the first person to spot the monster, so the other sailors pushed him to the back of the line). Some stone-faced, gray-bearded old guy was the second person to try and scored a perfect, direct hit—only

to watch his big-ass cannon shell bounce right off the monster and vanish into the sea.

"Oh, drat!" he said. "That rascal must be covered with six-inch armor plate!"

"Curse the beast!" the captain agreed. People had always accused me of cursing like a sailor, so hearing these salty old buggers swear so gently in *genuine anger* was actually kind of adorable.

We kept up our chase for the rest of the day, although after cannons proved useless, I can't imagine what we thought we were going to do if we actually caught the thing. By the time nightfall rolled around, I had puked one more time, had a couple spells of dry heaving, and finally got my sea legs to the point where I felt like I could maybe eat something. The narwhal had already disappeared under the waves.

"So that's it, right?" I said. "I mean, we can't possibly hope to keep chasing the narwhal or whatever in the dark."

"I don't see why not," Conseil said. "Glowing as it does, we certainly had no trouble keeping pace last night."

Glowing? For fuck's sake. Sure enough, sometime around 11:00 while I was chewing gingerly on some kind of giant, thick-ass flavorless cracker and trying to decide if I wanted to finally fall asleep or throw up again, somebody spotted the thing a few miles out. It was just beneath the surface of the water, completely still, and shining like a goddamned Christmas tree.

Ned Land insisted that he had harpooned more than one whale in the dead of night while it slept, which seemed like a shitty thing to brag about, but whatever. The captain gave the order, and we advanced toward it at half steam, practically holding our collective breath to avoid waking it. We crept forward, closer and closer, with that dumbass red-bearded harpooner hanging off the front of the boat. When we were almost close enough to reach out and touch it, his arm shot forward, and he chucked his harpoon right at the thing.

It hit with a clang and stuck.

Suddenly the electric narwhal light went dark, and we were hit with two massive waterspouts, which crashed onto our deck and knocked a bunch of crewmen right off their feet. Before I could even figure out what was happening—I mean, was it *shooting water at us through its blowhole*?—there was a hideous crash.

The motherfucking thing *rammed us*. And I was tossed over the railing and hurled into the pitch-black, freezing-ass sea.

Chapter II.

A WHALE OF UNKNOWN SPECIES.

I mean, I can swim fine, but the ocean was shockingly cold, choppy as balls, and I was a good twenty feet underwater before I even got my bearings enough to desperately flail my way back toward the surface. It was not great.

When I finally broke through the waves and gasped for breath, I could just barely make out the vast, dark shape of what could only be my ride, disappearing over the horizon. My stupid Sherlock Holmes clothes were glued to my body, weighing me down. I was sinking.

"Help!" I still hadn't figured out what would actually happen if I died while voyaging through literature—although technically I was pretty sure I already had, at least once—but that's not the kind of thing you dwell on when you're *actively drowning*. "Helllll—" My mouth filled with water, and I struggled against being dragged toward the depths. Suddenly my clothes were seized by strong, energetic hands, and I felt myself pulled abruptly back toward the surface.

"If Master would oblige me by leaning on my shoulder, Master will swim with much greater ease."

"Conseil!" I shouted as soon as I had regained enough breath to. "You are the best fucking manservant EVER."

"Not at all," he said. "But being in Master's employ, of course I followed Master overboard."

Of course. I wasn't about to make the comparison out loud, but I was reminded more than anything of Toto 2, the ten-legged Martian guard dog who had saved my life at least six or eight times on the barren wastelands of Barsoom. It might sound insulting to compare Conseil to a dumb mutt, but please understand that I freaking LOVED that dog.

Still, even with Conseil helping me swim, I felt like we were at least half-drowning. "So where's the boat? Is the boat coming back?"

"I think Master had best not depend on it to any great extent," he said. "As I jumped overboard, I heard the men at the helm lament that the propeller and rudder were utterly smashed."

"Smashed," I said. "Awesome."

"Yes, smashed by the monster's tusk! I believe it's the sole injury the *Abraham Lincoln* has sustained, but most inconveniently for us, the ship can no longer steer."

It took me a second to realize that *Abraham Lincoln* was the name of the boat. Which meant all of this was happening sometime after 1860 or so, but of course I already knew that the ship was coal-powered and had a howitzer and shit, so that more or less tracked.

"So we're pretty much fucked, is what you're saying."

"Perhaps," Conseil replied serenely. "However, we still have a few hours before us, and in a few hours, one can do a great many things."

He certainly was a cheerful little weirdo, and I decided I would have liked him even if he hadn't literally just saved me from drowning. We began swimming in the general direction of our long-lost Boat President, but my clothes still felt like they were made of lead. So Conseil pulled a small pocket knife out from somewhere and, after very explicitly and politely asking permission, slipped it under my clothing and sent Sherlock Holmes' wardrobe plummeting to the ocean floor. I returned the favor, and soon we were dog paddling in our skivvies.

Fortunately (I guess?), the sea grew calmer as the last hint of our ship's wake faded. Conseil concocted an elaborate plan where we would take turns floating on our backs while the other one towed for ten minutes before switching places to conserve our strength. He was certain that we could keep on until dawn that way, but between the day's narwhal shenanigans and staying up the entire previous night dealing with Sherlock Holmes bullshit, my limbs were cramping up to the point of uselessness after an hour or two. I could barely even stay afloat, much less take my shift towing Conseil.

"Uh, maybe you should go on ahead without me? And bring back help when you find it?"

"Leaving Master behind? Never! I'll drown before he does!"

Just then, the full moon popped out from behind a cloud, and the waves around us glistened with its reflection. Far off on the horizon, at least a good five miles out, I spotted the *Abraham Lincoln* silhouetted in the darkness. I reflexively called out but could only muster a wet cough.

Conseil was still doing marginally better than I was, and he yelled for help at regular intervals as he continued pulling me through the water. It might have just been the ringing in my ears, but for a second, I thought I heard someone calling back.

Conseil yelled again, and this time I was sure I heard it—a human voice answered. It was definitely a lot closer than the ship could possibly be, though. A rescue crew in a rowboat, hopefully? Or just some other sorry son of a bitch who was thrown from the deck? Conseil redoubled his efforts to swim us toward the sound of the voice, but I was at the end of my strength. My fingers gave out, my hands were useless, and my mouth convulsed, filling up with brine. I desperately tried to keep my head above water and felt my entire body smack against something as hard as a rock just before I passed out.

* * *

I couldn't have been out long, because when I regained consciousness, I was still cold and wet, but laying on something solid. Someone was massaging my guts way too hard, but in retrospect it was probably in an effort to get all the water I had swallowed out of my lungs.

"Jesus!" I coughed. "Conseil! Enough already!"

A voice came from over my shoulder. "Did Master ring for me?"

I pried open one eye to see a face in the moonlight that didn't belong to my faithful manservant, but I recognized, nevertheless.

"Ugh," I said. "Ned Land."

"In person, Sir," he said. "And still after his prize!"

I spit-coughed up one last lungful of water and made a failed attempt to sit up. "So is this like a rescue, or did you just get thrown overboard too?"

"Indeed I did, Professor, although I was luckier than you. Just as soon as I hit the water, I realized why my harpoon got blunted and couldn't puncture our gigantic narwhal's hide."

This was the first I'd heard that I was *faculty* or some shit, but it didn't seem terribly important at the moment. Ned was clearly super excited to tell

me something but was milking it for everything he could get.

"Yeah," I said, "and...?"

"It's because, Professor, this beast is made of boilerplate steel!"

He rapped his knuckles on the surface beneath us, and it obligingly gave him a dull clang in return. I know it sounds dumb, but my first thought was that the giant, glowing narwhal in this half-assed *Moby Dick* ripoff was also *a robot*.

"The contraption surely contains some sort of motor," Ned said, "and a crew to run it, but in the three hours I've lived on this floating island it hasn't shown a sign of life."

Oh. Duh. "It's a submarine."

"Some sort of underwater boat, near as I can figure it. But so far it has only ridden the waves, and otherwise hasn't stirred."

And this is where it finally dawned on me. I wasn't in a boat book *at all*. I was in a goddamned SUBMARINE book, which was somehow even *worse*. I was in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the* fucking *Sea*. And if I only knew three things about *Moby Dick*, that was still two more than I knew about *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

In fact, the only thing I knew about that particular book was that my asshole *dad* liked it. Or, at least he insisted that we all watch some dumb 1950s Disney movie version of it one year at Thanksgiving, which turned into a huge fight between him and my mom. They were already divorced at that point, and I don't remember exactly how the whole thing went down, but I'm a hundred percent sure I never watched the movie. And also that it was the last family holiday he ever bothered showing up for, including birthdays.

Before I could spend any more time dwelling on my shitty, boring family history, though, air bubbles started forming in the water around the metal platform we were perched on, and we started moving. The motion was smooth, and not terribly fast, but it was nevertheless disconcerting.

"So long as it navigates horizontally," Ned muttered, "I've no complaints. But if it gets the urge to dive, I wouldn't give two dollars for my hide!"

Conseil was sitting placidly at the platform's center, which remained—for now at least—a good two and a half feet above the ocean's surface. If he was at all distressed by our latest predicament, he didn't show it.

"How you doin' over there, buddy?" I asked.

"As well as Master might expect," he said cheerfully.

We kept floating for hours, in the exact opposite direction of the *Abraham Lincoln*, examining our weird metal raft as well as we could whenever we had a patch of moonlight. There was no hatch or porthole to be found, but Ned did turn up a big, iron ring fastened to the metal plates that came in super handy when we suddenly picked up speed around four in the morning, and all three of us almost went toppling into the drink. From that point on, we held on for dear life until dawn. It was shitty, to be sure, but still not as bad as some of the crap I was put through back on Mars, so I tried to keep things in perspective.

I was coming up on two days without sleep by this point, and a lot of that time was spent actively drowning, so I can't say for sure if I nodded off periodically throughout the night. At one point, I did hear the faint sound of organ music but had no way to know if I was dreaming it, or if I was clinging desperately to the top of the sort of submarine that would house a full orchestra. Just after dawn, I was hit with a splash of seafoam. I pried open my eyes and saw that our platform was just a few precious inches above the water.

We were submerging.

"Oh, damnation!" Ned shouted, stomping his boots on the metal floor as hard as he could. "Open up there, you antisocial navigators!"

The sinking stopped, and one of the smooth steel plates flew up to reveal a man's head. He gave an indecipherable yell, then disappeared, only to be replaced with eight or ten big, burly guys, who silently grabbed us from our perches and dragged us down into the belly of the beast.

Chapter III.

IMMOBILIZED.

Whoever these assholes were, they were no amateur manhandlers. Based on how efficiently they hauled us down that ladder, they manhandled *professionally*. We were shoved into a pitch-black room before we could really even figure out what was happening.

"Damnation!" Ned said from somewhere in the darkness. "These people are about as hospitable as the savages of New Caledonia! All that's lacking is for them to be cannibals!"

Okay, first of all, *racist*. Although I suppose it would explain why they bothered to bring us inside the submarine instead of just submerging and leaving us to drown. Fresh meat probably isn't that easy to come by when you spend all your time underwater, and for all I knew, I could very well be at the mercy of cannibals—it's not as if I could count on whoever wrote the book I was in to be *less* Caledonian-racist than its strapping, burly action hero. I felt the wall behind me, trying to decide if it was just regular-metal-room-in-a-submarine cold, or, like, *refrigerator* cold.

"Calm yourself, Ned, my friend," Conseil said. "Don't flare up so quickly. We aren't in a kettle yet."

"In a kettle, no, but in an oven for sure. It's dark enough for one. Luckily my Bowie knife hasn't left me, and I can still see well enough to put it to use."

Okay, on that point he was definitely full of shit, because it was dark as *balls* in there. You don't even *know* dark until you've experienced underwater submarine *oven refrigerator* dark. We explored the contours of the room, finding the walls with our hands (and some kind of hard-ass stool with my cold, still-naked shin). I guess it was thoughtful of them to put furniture in there for us, but they needn't have bothered. I collapsed onto what felt like a burlap rug on the hard metal floor and tried my best to pass out.

Ned Land's uninterrupted complaining wasn't making it easy. Maybe half an hour later, when my exhaustion had *almost* overcome my desire to punch that guy in the face, a dome light switched on in the ceiling and lit the room so bright I thought it was going to blind me through my eyelids.

"Finally!" Ned grunted. When my eyes finally adjusted enough so that I could open them without pain, I saw that he was crouched in some sort of goofy action pose, his knife at the ready. The room looked pretty much exactly like it felt in the darkness—metal walls, metal floor, metal table and stools, aforementioned burlap rug.

After a good solid minute of Ned jerking his head around and pointing his knife in every direction at every imaginary sound, a hidden door swung open to reveal two men. The first one was short and stocky and mustachioed, and the second was obviously the Main Submarine Captain Guy. For starters, he was hot like burning (and yeah, definitely old enough to be my dad, but whatever—when you're fifteen, lots of hot people are old enough to be your dad). He was tall and broad-shouldered and dark-skinned and absolutely *rocking* his goofy-ass sea otter coat or whatever it was. Jules Verne actually spends like six pages just describing his appearance in the original book and informs you that his eyes "gazed with icy assurance," "seemed to reflect thinking on an elevated plane," and "could probe your very soul." His mouth was "clearly etched," his teeth were "magnificent," and his deep breathing denoted "tremendous reserves of vitality." So if you're wondering how much Jules Verne secretly wanted to fuck Captain Nemo, the answer is zero percent, because it was NOT a secret.

Not that he introduced himself. Instead, he just talked to his first mate or whatever in some language none of us could understand.

"Master should tell our story," Conseil said. The whole "master" thing was already getting super old, but apparently, we'd been Professor and Manservant for a really long time, so I didn't want to blow my cover or whatever by making a big deal out of it. "Perhaps these gentlemen will grasp a few words of it?"

"Uh, you go ahead," I said. Since I only knew the portion that more or less started with boat-ramming, I figured this might be a chance to fill in some gaps.

Conseil introduced me as "Professor Aronnax," himself as my literal manservant (without giving any hint as to whether "Conseil" was his first or last name), and Ned Land as a "harpooner," which I guess was an actual job

title in whatever year this was. According to him, the good ship *Abraham Lincoln* was on an expedition to uncover the mysterious force that was sinking ships all the hell over the world, and according to the shitty night I had just endured, we damn well found it.

If they understood any of his tale, they sure weren't tipping their hand. "One resource still left to us is to try English," Conseil said. "Perhaps they would be familiar with this nearly universal language?"

This was the first I'd heard that we had actually all been speaking French the entire book so far. The same thing had basically happened on Mars—when I first arrived, everyone was speaking some kind of Barsoomian gibberish, and when it got to the part where I was supposed to have learned the language, they just magically started talking normal. On the small blessings front, at least I could be thankful that I was stuck in a public domain *English translation*, at least.

"I daresay our Canadian friend has the best English among us," Conseil said. Holy crap, was Ned supposed to be from *Canada*? I suppose if you want everybody to speak French in your French submarine book for French readers, Canada is the closest to a stereotypical American buffoon you're going to realistically get.

Ned told mostly the same story Conseil had, but with much greater indignation, somehow managing to invoke both international marine law and the writ of habeas corpus. Our captors ignored him as well, so Conseil tried German, which I apparently also spoke, since to me it sounded like the exact same speech he had already given. Shockingly, it got us nowhere.

"Perhaps Master might haul out everything he can recall from his days as a schoolboy and treat us to some serviceable Latin?" Conseil asked.

"You're joking, right?"

He just stared at me serenely and lovingly, like he was fondly remembering that one time I rescued his mother from a burning building. Well, hopefully the business where everybody pretended they were fluent in stuff worked both ways.

"Oo-yay am-rayed our ucking-fay oat-bay," I said with a completely straight face.

Conseil nodded to himself, but the Captain reacted exactly the same way he had to actual words, which was to patiently wait for me to finish and then look at me like I was an idiot. Then the two of them muttered to each other in Submarinish and slammed the wall-door shut.

Ned Land, of course, was incensed. "This is outrageous! We speak French, English, German, and Latin to these rogues, and neither of them has the decency to even answer back!"

"Anger won't get us anywhere," Conseil said, although I was actually kind of with Ned on this one—I mean, not in the sense that I expected them to speak my language or whatever, since Nemo looked like he was maybe East Indian or Pakistani, and I hadn't tried any made-up Urdu—but Jesus, dude, at least lock us up somewhere with a cot or a bucket of chicken.

"Besides," he continued, "we've gotten out of tighter spots. So perhaps wait a bit before you form your views on the commander and crew of this boat."

"My views are fully formed," Ned shot back. "They're rogues!"

"Oh, good. And from what country?"

"Roguedom!"

The two of them continued bickering, and just in case I'm making it sound like Conseil's banter was playful at all, I'm pretty sure that was just how he talked. You could tell just by how he looked at the Canadian harpooner that he haaaaaaaated that guy. Ned, at least, seemed oblivious. They showed no signs of letting up, but fortunately, after a few minutes, the door swung back open, sending Ned back into his knife crouch.

It was a third crewman with a cart of clothing, which reminded me that I was still pretty much in my wet underwear. My stint on Mars had ground out any concerns I ever had on the whole modesty front—even though I wore my jeans and hoodie the whole time, everyone who looked at me saw a naked, oily muscle guy. So now I doubtlessly looked like pasty old French asshole Professor Aronnax in soaking-wet underoos.

I did have a pang of genuine disappointment when it turned out that my old clothes weren't included on the cart. Back in Oz they had been laundered and returned to me a couple of times by cheerful, oblivious munchkins who insisted on pretending that the whole jeans-shirt-hoodie-socks-chonies combo was a checkered dress, and my sneakers even magically showed up on Mars when I got there. Well, fuck it. Whatever. I could wear a stock submarine uniform if I had to—at least these clothes actually fit me, and there were no sock garters, so they were already a step up from the Sherlock Holmes getup I had left at the bottom of the ocean.

While we were getting dressed, the guy rolled in a second cart full of silver trays. He still hadn't spoken, which I was okay with—he was

schlubby, clean-shaven and 40-ish, so basically the guy you'd stick on waiter duty on a crew full of dangerous submarine pirates. Also, Ned hadn't stabbed him yet, which I guess was good. He proceeded to set the table with linen napkins and tableware (every plate and fork had a little "N" logo on it —I realized later it was the submarine captain's initial and found it retroactively hilarious) and then laid out our feast.

The food was definitely weird—like, squid and urchins and shit—but not anywhere near as exotic as I'd gotten used to in the last two books, so I scarfed it down with abandon. Conseil and Ned joined me, and the silent waiter guy left us to it. By the time we had gotten close to devouring our feast, we were all starting to doze off—the last twelve hours or so had been *rough*.

So without so much as a good night, I found a patch of burlap, used my new boat coat as a pillow, and got some Zs.

Chapter IV.

THE TANTRUMS OF NED LAND.

Just to let you know ahead of time, this chapter is going to be the shortest one so far, because I have very little patience for chronicling the various tantrums of Ned fucking Land.

I have no idea how long I was out, but it was long enough that I was more or less refreshed. Also slightly headachey, which was usually how I woke up on the rare occasions I've managed to get in a good sixteen or eighteen hours. Conseil and Ned were still asleep, and every hint of our breakfast had been cleared.

Also, the air in the cell tasted way too much like carbon dioxide, and I was in the very early stages of suffocating to death.

Which I can tell you every single stage of, since back on Mars—two days ago by my internal clock—the entire damned planet ran out of oxygen and we pretty much sat around for a half a week waiting to suffocate until somebody finally clued me in that I was supposed to pull some action hero bullshit and go fix the pipes or whatever. (My entire contribution to that particular hero bullshit had been to open a door, die, and wake up in a different book, BT-dubs, so if these assholes thought they were getting an ace oxygen-pipe fixer or whatever, they were out of luck.)

Before I even had a chance to try the door, though (you know, MY SPECIALTY), a blast of salty air rushed into the room from a vent above it, and everything was fine. So it seemed that mild, occasional suffocation was just part of the deal here. Duly noted.

The breeze woke up both my cellmates. Conseil's first thought, of course, was for me.

"Did Master sleep well?"

"You know what? I actually did."

He smiled earnestly, then looked like he smelled a fart. "And how about you, Mr. Ned Land?"

The big Canadian groaned and stretched. "Like a log. Only I've no idea what time it is—unless maybe it's dinnertime?"

"Or breakfast," I said. "I feel like we could have been out a good, solid day."

"If that's the case, we deserve two meals, and speaking to myself, I'll do justice to them both!" His eyes grew wide, and then his brow furrowed. "Unless you think they're *fattening us up*."

"Surely," Conseil said, "we have not fallen into the hands of cannibals."

I had to agree. "Yeah, I'm not sure what *everything* on that plate was, but I'm pretty sure none of it was people."

"Just because they don't make a habit of it doesn't mean they don't indulge from time to time. When confronted with three such healthy, well-built specimens..." He trailed off, and you could see the internal conflict between accusing our captors of cannibalism and complaining about hunger play out on his face. "Anyhow, I'm as hungry as all Hades," he said, finally setting on the latter. "And dinner or breakfast, not one puny meal has arrived!"

"Mr. Land," Conseil said, "Surely we must adjust our stomachs to the chef's timetable."

"Bah!" Ned shot back. "You never allow yourself any displays of bile or attacks of nerves! You'd say your after-meal grace even if you didn't get any food, and you'd starve to death rather than complain!"

"What good would it do?" Conseil asked.

"Complaining doesn't have to *do* good, it just *feels* good!" You could definitely fault his logic there, since the constant pissing and moaning hadn't exactly seemed to improve his mood. "And if these pirates—I say pirates out of consideration for the professor's feelings, since neither of you will let me call them cannibals—if these pirates think they're going to smother me in this cage without hearing what cuss words spice up my outbursts, they've got another think coming!"

"I'll tell you what," I said. "How about you just complain quietly to yourself, inside your head, until you have something to say that actually adds to the conversation?"

"Well, how's this for a topic of discussion, Professor? We break out of here!"

"Out of a *submarine*," I said. "At the *bottom of the ocean*."

His brow furrowed. "So we stay. But we fix things by kicking out all the jailers, guards, and wardens!"

"It's impossible," Conseil said. "Not to mention inadvisable."

"And why is that, Sir? Some promising opportunity might come up, and I don't see what could stop us from taking advantage of it. If there are only about twenty men on board this machine, I don't think they can stave off two Frenchmen and a Canadian!"

In my previous voyages through literature, the friends I made along the way were the one part that made all the tedium and bullshit relatively bearable. Ned, however, was clearly an asshole, and even though Conseil was a delightful combination of smartass and sweetheart, he was also a smidge exhausting in his own way. The pair of them were obviously there to be the little angel and devil perched on my shoulders. Maybe if I left them to their own devices, they would eventually wind up hate-fucking, and I could just sneak away.

Because here's the thing: I was reasonably sure that *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was about dudes sailing really deep under the ocean on a fancy submarine, and that we were just supposed to chill and go along with it. But I didn't actually *care* anymore. I had spent two books and a short story trying to play by the rules in hopes of satisfying some sort of unspecified victory condition and getting my ass home, and it hadn't happened. So now I had a new plan:

Knock the whole thing off the rails and burn whatever the plot of this book was supposed to be to the motherfucking ground.

"You know what, Ned?" I said. "Knock yourself out."

He squinted at me. "You mean *feign unconsciousness*, and strike when my attack should come at its most unexpected?"

"Ugh." I had actually done pretty much that exact thing one time on Mars, and accidentally killed some poor, giant, four-armed son of a bitch who was just trying to do his job. "I just mean do what you're going to do and leave me out of it."

We wound up being stuck in that room for a good half a day, and I regretted that advice within the first fifteen minutes. If you've never spent six or seven hours locked up with some hangry asshole working himself into more and more of a tizzy until he's eventually beating on the walls and yelling at the top of his lungs, I DO NOT RECOMMEND IT. Hell is other

people, for real, you guys. Actually, Conseil was super chill the whole time, so I guess Hell is specifically Canadian harpooners.

Finally, during a rare and blessed moment of silence, the wall-door made a clicking noise and swung open to reveal the schlubby waiter guy. Ned, however, had long since lost his shit by this point. He tackled the guy and started choking him without even waiting to see if lunch was going to be involved. Conseil rushed into the fray and tried to physically pry Ned's hands off the waiter's throat.

A deep, resonant voice cut through the din in a language that was probably supposed to be French, since I heard it as clear, unaccented American English.

"Calm down, Mr. Land. And you, Professor, kindly listen to me."

Chapter V.

THE MAN OF THE WATERS.

It was the ship's captain, obviously. For whatever reason, his voice seemed to knock the wind out of Ned's sails, so that was good, at least. He let go of the waiter's throat, dusted himself off, and tried to act like he hadn't just tried to kill a guy. His poor victim actually waited for the captain to wave him away before he bolted off down the hallway, gasping for air.

The whole thing was a stark reminder that I never actually did figure out if the characters in these books were real people, or hallucinations, or robots. Like, did that schlubby waiter guy have actual thoughts and feelings? Some kind of schlubby waiter *family* somewhere back on land? I sighed inwardly and amended my official position to *burning the plot of this book to the motherfucking ground after making sure the submarine crew and any other innocent bystanders had lifeboated off to safety.*

Which was far less satisfying, catharsis-wise.

The captain strolled into our cell, leaned on the table, and stared at us for a moment with a creepy/handsome intensity that was medium-hilarious. "Gentlemen," he said at last, "I speak French, English, German, and Latin with equal fluency. Hence I could have answered you as early as our initial interview, but first I wanted to make your acquaintance and then think things over."

"Cool," I said. "Cool cool cool."

"No doubt, Sir, you've felt that I waited rather too long before paying you this second visit. But some extremely inconvenient circumstances have brought you into the presence of a man who has cut himself off from humanity. Your coming has disrupted my whole existence."

My companions seemed content to let me do the talking, and even though I wasn't particularly excited about trying to pull off the whole French professor schtick, I was hungry enough to basically eat Ned Land. At this stage, playing along seemed like the strategy most likely to get me fed.

"We were just trying to figure out what was sinking all those boats," I said. "We totally thought you were a *narwhal*."

"Professor Aronnax," he replied. "Do you dare claim that your frigate's captain wouldn't have chased and cannonaded an underwater boat as readily as a monster?"

"Maybe. I don't know his life."

"Surely I have every right to treat you as my enemy," he said. "To put you back on the platform of this ship that has served as your refuge, sink under the sea, and forget you ever existed."

"Perhaps it would be the right of a *savage*," Conseil said, in a tone that I'm pretty sure was genuinely offended (as opposed to his usual fake-offended-to-mess-with-Ned voice). "But not that of a civilized man!"

Now it was the captain's turn to be offended. "My good sir, I'm not what you term a civilized man! I've severed all ties with society, therefore I obey none of its regulations, and I insist that you never invoke them in front of me!"

As handsome and regal as this Pakistani-George-Clooney guy was, he definitely got a bit of the crazy-eyes going when he talked about his relationship with the world at large. He went on to tell us he would let us roam the ship freely if we agreed to let him lock us up in our cabins periodically when he got up to anything particularly shady. Since the alternative was for him to just lock us up permanently—or, you know, *murder us*—we took the deal.

"Now, allow me to finish what I have to tell you," he said. "I've heard of you, Professor Aronnax. Among the books that make up my favorite reading, you'll find the work you've published on the great ocean depths. I've *pored* over it. And thus I know that you've taken your studies as far as terrestrial science can go."

Wow—this guy had read my book? *I* hadn't even read my book.

"You will not regret the time you spend aboard my vessel," he continued. "In fact, stunned amazement will probably be your habitual state of mind. For your benefit, I shall make another underwater tour of the world —perhaps my last, who knows?—reviewing everything I've studied in the depths, and you can be my fellow student. Starting this very day, you'll

enter a new element—thanks to me, you're going to learn the ultimate secrets of our planet."

Ugh. Was this guy trying to *bang* me? I mean, I knew he saw some pasty old professor when he looked at me, and not a fifteen-year-old girl, but it still felt gross. When Dejah Thoris had more or less been my prisoner on Mars and tried to hit on me, it had skeeved me out. With the power differential reversed, it was fifty billion times worse.

"Bitchin'," I said.

He appeared to miss the sarcasm entirely, which I suppose boded well for my stint on this boat. "Now, you may simply call me Captain Nemo," he said (and you'll be proud to hear that I refrained from telling him to call me Admiral Dory). "You and your companions are passengers on the *Nautilus*."

He told Conseil and Ned that a meal was waiting for them in their cabin, but of course I was to dine with him. What he didn't realize was that I had killed giant gorillas forty times his size in the last book with my bare hands, and even if I didn't technically have superpowers anymore, the whole burning-this-motherfucker-to-the ground plan was going to start real quick if he pulled any shit.

He led me to a fancy-ass dining room where our meal had already been laid out. Nemo also wasn't aware of how aggressively I could pack down some lunch, so whether he was put off by my display of rapaciousness or had never actually intended to put the moves on me in the first place, he seemed content to brag about how rad all his food was while I went about my business. Every bit of it was from the ocean, what tasted like steak was actually sea turtle, yadda yadda. He was *extremely* proud that nothing on the table had been grown or raised on land. Alas, there didn't seem to be any underwater wheat-equivalent, so none of the meat was baked into pie form, but other than that, it was all pretty tasty.

The meal did wonders for my mood. "You fucking *love* the ocean, huh?" I asked at a rare interval when gaps in his conversation and my own chewing allowed me to get a word in.

"Yes, I love it! It covers seven-tenths of the planet Earth. It's an immense wilderness where a man is never lonely because he feels *life astir* on every side." He went on to list how many kinds of mollusks and vertebrates and shit were underwater, and my eyes glazed over.

"But most of all, the sea doesn't belong to *tyrants*. On its surface they can still exercise their iniquitous claims, battle each other, devour each

other, haul every earthly horror. But thirty feet below sea level, their dominion ceases, their influence fades, their power vanishes! Here alone lies independence! Here I recognize no superiors! Here I'm free!"

Captain Nemo suddenly fell silent. He was a big, freaky weirdo, and when he wasn't trying to get into my pants, I actually kind of liked him.

"Now, Professor," he said after the loud, sustained belch that indicated that I was done. "If you'd like to inspect the *Nautilus*, I'm yours to command."

I'm not going to lie to you, the *Nautilus* was pretty rad. There was a big ol' library where Nemo offered me a seaweed cigar or some bullshit and lounged some on a plush couch, but mostly refrained from getting overtly romantic. It also contained a whole museum, with oil paintings and sheet music and cool-looking shells and stuff, plus a fountain. (I don't know why that was the specific touch that made everything seem over-the-top to the point of ludicrousness, but seriously, who puts a *fountain* in their submarine?)

Nemo's bedroom was next to the big museum/library/study room, and my bedroom, of course, was attached to his. All the instruments necessary to monitor the submarine's basic functions were in his room—which I guess was convenient if you needed to check barometric pressure in the middle of the night or whatever—but other than that, it was quite bare. Considering that I half expected a king-sized bed, a heart-shaped hot tub and a mirrored ceiling, it was a pleasant surprise.

I didn't realize at the time, of course, that maritime instruments were basically his *entire jam*. He had brought me here because he was bursting at the seams to *talk with a fellow scientist about science*.

"There's a powerful, obedient, swift, and effortless force," he said, eyes aglow with wonder, "that can be bent to any use and which reigns supreme aboard my vessel. It does everything. It lights me, it warms me, it's the soul of my mechanical equipment."

"So, electricity?"

"Electricity!" he exclaimed. "Until now, its dynamic potential has remained quite limited, capable of producing only small amounts of power. But *my* electricity isn't the run-of-the-mill variety." He went into this whole wild-eyed spiel about underwater veins of exotic metals and, like, magnesium bromide and stuff. It was actually kind of adorable.

After he finished showing me his instruments (and calm down, I mean that literally), we went on to finish the tour. There were various crew cabins—one of which contained Conseil and Ned, still eating—a spacious kitchen connected to vast storage rooms, a bathroom with running water, and a rowboat that didn't seem terribly useful when we were actively underwater. The engine rooms looked super cool, even though I didn't understand a goddamn word of Nemo's enthusiastic gobbledygook regarding their operation. He did say that they could produce a top speed of fifty miles per hour, which seemed pretty fast for a submarine, I guess.

He proceeded to go into all the very specific details of internal submarine mechanics, but fortunately an occasional "uh huh" or "oh yeah?" was all I needed to contribute to keep him rambling. He apparently ordered every part of the boat from a different shipbuilder all over the planet, though, and assembled them in secret on an island somewhere that he later burned down.

"Do understand, my dear professor, that running afoul of the *Scotia*, which caused such a great uproar, was the result of an entirely accidental encounter. I was navigating two meters beneath the surface of the water when the collision occurred. However, I could see that it had no dire consequences."

"And I guess you accidentally rammed our ship, too?"

"Professor, that troubled me, because the *Abraham Lincoln* is one of the best ships in the gallant American navy, but they attacked me, and I had to defend myself! All the same, I was content simply to put the frigate in a condition where it could do me no harm. It won't have any difficulty getting repairs at the nearest port."

He also told me he was rich enough to single-handedly pay the tenbillion-franc national debt, and apparently the casual way I absorbed this information impressed him, even though it was mostly due to the fact that I had no idea how much actual money ten billion francs converted to, even in old-timey 1800s dollars.

"Now, if you don't mind, Professor," Captain Nemo said when he had finally finished bragging about his fortune and his boat, "we'll determine our exact position and fix the starting point of our voyage." He made a big production of dragging me up to the submarine roof so he could measure the longitude with his sextant or whatever, and yes I'm aware that EVERY SINGLE ELEMENT OF SUBMARINE LIFE SOUNDS LIKE ONE

GIANT DICK REFERENCE. Then he brought me back to the museum room and left me to my own devices.

Since I didn't actually have any of those, I was genuinely relieved when Conseil and Ned arrived to keep me company. Both of them seemed greatly cheered by their meal, and Conseil immediately began classifying the various unmarked specimens on display. Classifying fish and stuff was the main thing he did? Like, as a job?

Ned, however, was laser-focused. "What have you learned of the *Nautilus*, Professor? How many men are on board? Ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred?"

"Uh..." I hadn't seen a single crewman other than Nemo, plus the waiter and that one mustache guy who was with him when he was pretending not to speak languages. "Bare-ass minimum, three," I said.

"See, he's hiding his numbers!" Ned exclaimed. "There's nothing to see —nothing we'll *ever* see from this sheet-iron prison! We're simply running around blindfolded—"

Just as he uttered that last word, as if to illustrate the point, the lights went out and we were plunged into complete darkness. Then, with an echoing, mechanical sound, two big windows opened, one on either side of the room. The oceanscape outside them was brilliantly lit by the ship's glow, to the point where the water itself could have been liquid light.

Conseil and Ned rushed to one window, but my eyes were drawn to the other. There, scrawled right on the glass in four-inch-tall letters, in what might have been Sharpie, read the following:

THEY CAN ONLY SEE WHAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE HERE. THAT'S WHY THEY SEND US.

Then, in smaller letters beneath it: *Look under your bed*.

Chapter VI.

AN INVITATION IN WRITING.

Ned and Conseil were marveling at the majestic wonders of the open sea—we had slipped into some kind of gulf stream situation, rushing through undersea currents with a bunch of giant-ass fish engaged in a dolphin disco all around us. My mind, however, was racing faster than the submarine.

This had to be some sort of fourth-wall-breaking message from outside the world of the book. Or *did it*? Could "they only see what's supposed to be there" just be more of Nemo's "we're better than all of them" pickupline bullshit? If that was all the message was, the dude was *probably* hiding naked under my bed already.

Conseil ran from one window to the other, following some specimen of ocean life that had darted underneath the ship, and Ned followed. The two of them were competing to see who could accurately classify more fish—Conseil by family, genus, and species, and Ned mostly by flavor. (The howlong-until-they-hate-fuck clock was hovering around 11:30, for anyone keeping score.) At the moment, however, I didn't care about any of that.

Neither of my companions made any remark whatsoever about the note scrawled on the submarine window. So this wasn't Nemo trying to get into my pants (or, at least, not *just* that). There was some clandestine agent from the real world sneaking around this boat. If this note was invisible to both my stalwart companions, the culprit wasn't either of them.

Unless that's just what they wanted me to think. Shit, now I was crawling up my own ass with conspiracy theories, but there was nothing for it. I mean, think about it—if the message itself was invisible to anybody who wasn't supposed to see it, whoever wrote it could have just walked around wearing a big red button that said "ask me about my teenage girl trap at the Calabasas Mall" to get my attention. But they wanted to get my attention while *keeping their identity secret*. From who? Me? Some higher-up who was also watching them?

For all I knew Conseil and Ned were both in on it. Half the ship could be agents from the real world, scribbling secret messages all over to judge people's reactions and root out other non-fictional characters. If that was the case, I wasn't ready to tip my hand until I figured out what the hell was going on. Which meant that I had to spend two solid hours in there with Conseil and Ned, pretending to be mesmerized by boring-ass fish. To be fair, a lot of the stuff swooping around outside was actually pretty neat, but I wasn't in the mood to appreciate it.

"Such magnificence," Conseil said. "How far beneath the surface would Master guess we are presently?"

"I don't know, I'm gonna go ahead and say twenty thousand leagues."

Ned made a throat sound like he was trying to swallow his own tongue. "Surely you're joking," he said.

"No, I'm pretty sure."

"The ocean floor is perhaps *two* leagues, at the very deepest location ever measured," he insisted.

"Just wait," I said. I had no way of knowing how much of the underwater crap in this book was actual science and how much was absurd Civil War-era science fiction, but the one goddamned thing I knew was how many leagues under the sea we were going to be, and I would not be convinced otherwise. Ned looked at me like my head was screwed on backward, and Conseil looked at me like the two of us were sharing some private joke that Ned wasn't in on. Whatever. They returned to their fish ogling, and I went back to trying to disguise my sulk.

After they finally decided to go check their cabin to see if a new meal had been laid out—the two of them had apparently been assigned a shared room, hilariously—I returned to my own stateroom to discover that dinner was indeed waiting. My digs were actually a little apartment with a main room, a bedroom, and a compact bathroom with a toilet and tub with honest-to-Satan running water.

The realization that I could just *take a bath whenever I wanted* damn near floored me. I had spent a good four hours in Sherlock Holmes's tub, and after months and months of the desserts of Barsoom, I immediately decided that for this book I was going to more or less live in that thing. There were two doors leading out of the suite—one that led to the library, and the one in between my room and Nemo's—but I was pleased to discover that they could both be bolted from the inside.

Which left me alone with a platter full of exotic seafood, a giant bowl full of turtle soup, and whatever the hell might be stashed away under the bed.

Did I even want to find out? I mean, I definitely had to run a broom under there to make sure it wasn't *a person*. That shit was *happening*. So if there was any kind of magic-electricity 1800s video surveillance monitoring me, my cover was going to be blown either way. I scarfed down a couple fillets of delicate-ass fish, grabbed a big, heavy brush thing I found in the bathroom just in case things were about to *get real*, crouched down, and pulled the blankets up away from the foot of the bed.

There was no naked Nemo. (I mean I wasn't really *expecting* him to be there, but as I've said, I genuinely did not know fuck-all about *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, so...?) What I did find was something wrapped in a brown paper bundle and tied with string.

Inside were my jeans and hoodie, along with the rest of the clothes I'd left behind in the Sherlock Holmes book.

Huh.

* * *

I woke up the next morning slowly, lazily, after what felt like probably a solid twelve hours dead to the world. I was momentarily disappointed to discover that the silver trays on the table only contained the sad remains of the previous night's meal, but considering that anything else would mean that the door locks were useless, my breakfastlessness was for the best. I cleaned up a smidge and put on one of the sailor outfits in my closet. I had no doubt that my hoodie would look the same as the standard issue uniform to most random people on the boat, but until I figured out which jackass was leaving me secret window messages, I wasn't ready to reveal that I was receiving them.

Because whoever it was, fuck 'em. I was basically a prisoner here, on this submarine and also in a series of literature's dumbest public domain adventure stories that certainly appeared like it was going to continue forever. And there might indeed be some other refugee from the real world stuck in here with me who wanted to help—the Wizard of Oz had turned out to be some neckbeard from the Valley, after all—but it was also entirely possible that my captors were just messing with me. Since I still had no idea why I was abducted in the first place, I couldn't even begin to guess what *their* whole deal might be.

There was a knock at the door, and I begrudgingly unlocked it to find Conseil on the other side.

"How did Master sleep?" he asked. "If there is any service I might provide, of course you need only ask."

"Okay, here's a thing," I said. "Maybe we just chill with the whole 'Master' business, and you just call me—" Suddenly I realized that I did not know my actual first name. "*Professor?* Or something?"

Conseil was beside himself. "In all the years I've served Master, Master has never indicated that he was displeased with the manner in which I have addressed him!" His face went white. "Have I *displeased* Master? Has *Ned Land* said something?"

"What? No. Ugh—you know what, it's fine. Call me whatever you want."

His face relaxed back into his usual, pleasant smile. Conseil was an odd little dude, I'll tell you what. "Just so. Now, shall we seek our breakfast? Judging by the caliber of his snoring, waiting on Mr. Land is inadvisable if we hope to get a meal in before lunch."

We headed for the mess hall, or breakfast room, or whatever you call the whole cafeteria situation in a submarine. Conseil was absolutely enamored with the design and fabric of our boat clothes, like to the point where I thought he might be messing with me. Then my conspiracy brain kicked in again—was he focusing on my outfit *specifically to point out that I wasn't wearing my hoodie*? Since there were exactly three people on this entire submarine so far who had speaking parts, Conseil and Ned were still my second and third most likely suspects, regardless of their performance the previous day.

The good news was that I had plenty of time to interrogate them on the down-low and ponder the likelihood of either of them being a secret spy from the real world since Nemo basically abandoned us on that underwater boredom cruise for an entire fucking week.

Granted, entire banquets of seafood and clean clothes and stuff appeared at regular intervals, and we were left to wander the ship as we pleased, but we barely encountered a single crewperson the entire time. I spotted a pilot guy busily steering us around in a glass dome thing, and the mustache dude from the first day would climb up to the roof every morning, look at the horizon with a telescope, and spout some submarine-language gibberish. Plus, sometimes we caught the mute waiter guy carting in our meals. But

that was *it*. So either Nemo and a whole bunch of sailors were specifically keeping out of sight, or the entire operation could be run by three people (or four, if you included the waiter).

Which would make Ned's whole submarine-stealing mutiny plan like a million times more workable, come to think of it.

I'll save you the excruciating details of everything we ate and what all the fish outside looked like (if you've ever read the actual Jules Verne version of this you will damn well THANK ME FOR THAT CONSIDERATION, because that dude ABSOLUTELY DOES NOT) and just mention two important things that happened while we sat around waiting for plot to happen. The first was that I finally started to bond a little bit with Conseil and Ned. If either of them was an undercover spy, they were *incredibly* good at their job, because I had spent an assload of time with fictional characters from hundred-year-old novels over the past few months, and these two had the routine down pat.

Despite my carefully-maintained patina of world-weary sarcasm, I had come to appreciate genuine sincerity during the course of my adventures, and these two rivaled my old pals from Oz for sheer earnestness. (You know, if the Scarecrow had cared primarily about scientific classification and kissing my ass, and the Cowardly Lion exclusively wanted to harpoon shit.)

I actually missed my old Oz gang (particularly the sexily-robotic Tin Woodsman—so far this book was *seriously* lagging in the whole hopeless-crush department). Or should that be *hopeful* crush? On Mars, I had experienced my first real kiss with a guy who, despite EXTREMELY questionable make-out skills, was hot like burning, and then got a lot more practice in with the eminently smoochable Dejah Thoris. Holy crap—had I somehow gone from Aggressively Mean To Hide Her Feelings Secret Crush Girl to *Actively Miss Sweet Makeouts Girl*?

Just the thought of it made me homesick like *crazy*. No amount of bonding with Conseil and Ned (or the Scarecrow or Lion or my four-armed, green sister-mom Sola on Mars) would get me to the point where I was comfortable discussing makeouts with them. For that, I needed *Madeline*. The fact that this whole literary shitshow had robbed me of the hours and hours we should have spent locked in her bedroom agonizing over every detail of every makeout absolutely *gutted* me (especially considering that the haughtily gorgeous Dejah Thoris was Madeline's *exact* type).

Uuuuuugh. Fuck my life.

Anyway, the other thing that happened during my week of doing nothing was that I realized I was one million percent over caring about what the plot of the actual book was supposed to be. I had spent most of Oz trying to figure out if I was in a computer simulation, or on a drug trip, or experiencing the weirdest-ever symptom of serious mental illness, or what. Then I spent the next book just dealing with the constant, never-ending stream of ass that was *Barsoom*. But it was that one, brief day in the Sherlock Holmes story that finally broke the camel's back. I *solved* that shit. I finished the story with extreme prejudice, summoned a minihurricane, and teleported the hell out of London on my own terms, and *still* didn't escape from Public Domain Literature Jail. Basically, if that didn't get me home, no amount of playing by the rules was going to.

Which left me exactly two alternatives: either accept that this was my life now and get used to desert planets and underwater voyages and whatever the hell was next, or figure out a way to fuck something up.

I spent a *lot* of time that week wondering what would happen if I rigged the roof door to stay open when we submerged, or just flung my ass into the open sea. I actually had a theory that I technically died at the end of all these things, and that was what transported me from book to book. But even though I would *probably* get to the point where I was fed up enough to test that shit eventually, I wasn't there yet. Also, since I still wasn't sure if all the characters who inhabited these stories were *people*, just drowning the whole cast didn't particularly appeal either.

Then again, if Ned's whole mutiny thing started to play out, and I was handed some kind of opportunity to *selectively* murder, I suppose I'd have some decisions to make.

Finally, after at least five or six days, just as selective murder was looking more and more appealing, Conseil, Ned and I wandered into my suite to see if dinner had appeared, and we found a note instead. It was hand-written in pretty respectable calligraphy, and the language was old-timey-polite as balls.

Professor Aronnax Aboard the Nautilus November 16, 1867 Captain Nemo invites Professor Aronnax on a hunting trip that will take place tomorrow morning in his Crespo Island forests. He hopes nothing will prevent the professor from attending, and he looks forward with pleasure to the professor's companions joining him.

CAPTAIN NEMO. (Legit in all caps)

Commander of the Nautilus.

"A hunting trip!" Ned exclaimed.

Conseil was just as excited. "And in his forests on Crespo Island!"

"But does this mean that the old boy *goes ashore*?"

Nemo had strongly implied that he'd forsaken dry land entirely, and Ned seemed utterly flabbergasted to learn that he might have been exaggerating. He was super excited about the trip, though, because he figured it might result in an escape opportunity or at the very least fresh venison, and he greeted both prospects with roughly equal enthusiasm.

Conseil responded to the invitation with his usual "as Master wishes." It didn't seem like a particularly passive-aggressive one, so he seemed to be on board as well. The two of them went to the study to try to figure out where the hell Crespo Island was, and I went to bed. The next morning, I wandered into the study and found Captain Nemo waiting. He bowed, which I guess is how you greet someone in 1867 after you abandon them for a week on your super-posh submarine.

"Now," he said, "if you and your companions would join me for breakfast, I would beg you to do so without formality. Although I promised you a stroll in my forests, I made no promise that you would encounter a restaurant there. Accordingly, eat your breakfast like a man who'll probably eat dinner only when it's extremely late."

Since I ate pretty much every single meal exactly that way, I was way ahead of him. We met Conseil and Ned in the galley and chowed down. Then Nemo brought us to a smallish room near the engines and told us to suit up—the suits in question, of course, were big, fancy diving rigs.

Ned was not pleased. "Do you mean to tell me that the forests of Crespo Island are *underwater forests*?"

"They are indeed, Mr. Land," Nemo said. For the record, he spoke the words "Mr. Land" as if addressing to a particularly loathsome five-year-old. You could see all hope of making a run for it (on an *island*, mind you) and delicious deer meat drain from Ned's face.

"Oh, great! And you, Professor Aronnax, are you going to stick yourself inside these clothes?"

"I guess, sure."

"Well, have it your way, Sir. But I'll never get into one of those things unless they force me." He turned to his bunkmate. "And is *Conseil* going to risk it?"

"Where Master goes, I go."

I couldn't decide if Ned was just pouting because Conseil was acting manlier than him, or if some kind of some kind of hate-fuck jealousy drama was playing out behind the scenes. I was genuinely starting to hope that those two crazy kids would eventually get together, but since Conseil seemed *awfully* devoted to Aronnax, and I had zero interest in being one of the points on *that* romantic triangle, I let it be.

The first members of Nemo's general-purpose crew we'd seen in a week showed up to help us into our diving suits, which turned out to be surprisingly svelte and comfortable, except for the bulky, weighted boots and big, spherical metal helmets.

"Now," Nemo said as soon as he, Conseil, a random crewman, and I were outfitted properly, "all that remains is our arms."

At this point, a crewmember handed me a big-ass, lovingly-crafted, fully-automatic underwater hunting rifle that looked so deadly it would have made John Carter drool.

Chapter VII.

STROLLING THE PLAINS.

"Happy hunting," Ned said, clearly pissed that we all got guns, but still choosing to sulk about it rather than putting on a diving suit to join us. I couldn't even move my feet in those lead boots, but more anonymous crew appeared to help shove us into an adjoining submarine airlock chamber thing, and soon Nemo, Conseil, Rando Crew Guy (who was built like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, BT-dubs), and I were falling gently to the ocean floor.

It was only about eight feet below the *Nautilus*, and maybe thirty feet beneath the surface in total, which was slightly disappointing because I had been promised thousands and *thousands* of motherfucking leagues. It was also a breathtaking underwater wonderland, though, so there was that. Sunlight filtered down through the waves and reflected off the smooth sand to light up the seascape as brightly as if we were on land, which gave every single plant, rock, fish, and mollusk a psychedelic, technicolor glow. The suits were designed to let as move with perfect freedom and walk pretty naturally on the ocean floor. But as we began our casual stroll, the undisputed beauty of my surroundings was the furthest thing from my mind.

Because my thoughts had turned almost entirely to *murder*.

It was as if the book was calling my bluff. Oh, you want to violently derail the plot? Well, here's an underwater machine gun, *go nuts*. Way back in Oz I had a theory that the whole business was some kind of children's-book-based brainwashing thing designed to turn me into a mind-controlled KGB assassin (I know, but it kind of made sense at the time). And if turning me into an unrepentant killer was my captors' intent, I will tell you that on Mars they did their level motherfucking best. I found myself scripted into all these dumb, choreographed sword fights where my opponents somehow managed to impale themselves on my blade no matter how half-assed I

swung it, and by the end of the book, I was straight-up gunning down giant green Martians by the dozen to *rescue womenfolk*. The thing was, though, I never wanted it. I never *liked* it.

But now that I was facing what appeared to be a life sentence, and the plot handed me a deadly weapon, all I could do was to picture myself using it. As wrong as the desire to just burn the whole goddamned book to the ground felt, *I couldn't stop myself from desiring it*. Trapping me in the plots of awful books was *fucked*. Kidnapping me and leaving my family and friends back in Calabasas to fucking *mourn me* was FUUUUUUCKED.

But as much as I wanted to set fire to whoever did this to me, Captain Nemo and Rando Johnson and Conseil and whoever else *weren't them*.

Well, shit, *maybe* they were—technically, for all I knew, they could all be in on the con. But it was just as likely they were cardboard cutouts parroting back scripted lines, or AI computer programs so advanced that they were indistinguishable from sentient beings, or other sorry-ass kids who had been abducted from malls decades ago and had long since gone native. Regardless, if the Secret Masters who controlled public domain literature were trying to get me to snap and just shoot everyone, they were shit out of luck, because I wasn't doing it.

So far, these books always, *unfailingly* set things up so I eventually had to kill *something*—even in Oz there was that witch, and the Sherlock Holmes thing I basically offed an abusive murderer guy with a *snake*. But self-defense was categorically different from assassination, and if that was their jam, they just flat-out picked the wrong girl.

A tiny part of me genuinely thought I might be transported back home right then and there by officially deciding never to be a mind-controlled KGB assassin, but no dice. In fact, we kept marching right on through that majestic oceanscape for *hours*. Finally, sometime past noon when we were deep enough that the sunlight was only enough to make everything look mildly beautiful rather than all balls-out kaleidoscope-majestic, we came to the underwater forest. From what I could tell there was absolutely no reason we couldn't have just driven the fucking submarine all the way there, but whatever—I had to admit that the exercise had been a much-needed release-valve for what I now realized was a *significant* amount of pent-up rage.

Some distance into the big patch of tree-sized underwater plant life, Nemo signaled that it was time for a break. There was no talking through our diving helmets, of course, but the silence suited me fine. Conseil wandered toward me, and I pressed the window of my big dome helmet against his to see how he was doing.

He wiggled his head around in there and grinned like a kid on Christmas—he must have been scientifically categorizing his ass off all morning. Seeing the utter delight on his face actually made me laugh out loud. Aw, *buddy*. I could never mind-controlled-KBG-assassinate *you*.

I was surprised at how little appetite I had worked up during the morning's hike, but I had traded all that spare hunger for exhaustion, and the moment I sat down on the sandy ocean floor to relax, I felt myself starting to nod off. And why not? If this was going to be any kind of extended rest period, I wasn't too proud to straight-up nap.

I have no idea how long I was out, but when I opened my eyes, I was face to face with a giant, three-foot-tall underwater spider staring at me with creepy, beady little eyes and leaning back in preparation for a pounce.

For a brief moment, I thought I was back on Barsoom. Stuff like that happened *all the time* on Barsoom. Before I could even find my gun and go all Warlord of Mars on its ass, though, Rando Johnson smacked the thing right on its central body-head thing with the butt of his rifle, and its big creepy legs convulsed and curled up tight.

I had kind of assumed that naptime would mark the end of our trip, but whatever we were supposed to be hunting wasn't giant sea spiders. Nemo kept marching us onward, ever deeper, until the forest started thinning for lack of sunlight a couple of hours later. We had to turn on the lights built into our diving suits. Finally, we came to a sheer rock wall. Crespo Island, I guess?

And that was it. We turned around and started walking back toward the submarine. It wasn't like I could ask Nemo what was up—he and Rando occasionally exchanged hand signals, but submarine sign language was apparently just as made up as submarine regular language because I knew a reasonable amount of ASL, and this wasn't that.

We took a different route on the way back which was considerably steeper, although no more difficult to travel, thanks to the made-up underwater physics that governed my diving apparatus. I worried that moving toward the surface so quickly was going to give me the bends or some shit—that was a thing, right? But who knows, maybe this book was written before they knew about the bends. Either way, I didn't get it.

I did get startled almost out of my diving helmet when Nemo suddenly pulled his rifle off his back, right next to me, and fired at something passing through the foliage that I hadn't even noticed yet. It turned out to be a big, beautiful sea otter with brown and silver fur that probably weighed as much as I did. Nemo's bullet struck the creature, and a web of electricity sparked over its entire body.

That fucker was shooting *lightning* bullets. *Underwater*. That had to be a terrible idea, right? Didn't *electric razors* pretty much kill you if you dropped them in the bathtub? Well, whatever. It was a good reminder that technically all of this was 1860s science fiction and didn't have to make any more actual sense than the mystery rays that powered all the made-up technology on Mars.

A short while later, Rando aimed his rifle straight up, fired through the water into the sky, and bagged an albatross that happened to be passing by. I wasn't all that big on hunting and was also fairly sure albatrosses were basically THE symbol for impending doom in old-ass ocean books. Still, I couldn't help but be a little impressed—it was pretty badass.

The sun had set by the time I finally saw the *Nautilus*'s glow in the distance. If I thought that meant our adventure was over, though, I was in for one more surprise. Without warning, Nemo turned around, grabbed me by the shoulders, and pushed me down into a mass of algae on the ocean floor. Rando, still towing an otter and an albatross with one hand, did the same thing to Conseil, and then the two of them immediately joined us in the sludge.

I looked up to see two enormous masses hurtling by above us, and although Conseil could probably tell you exactly what *type* of sharks they were, even I was astute enough to see they were the kind that could chomp through a human being with a single bite. This was it. This was my chance to use this loathsome rifle on something that wanted to kill me and get the rest of that pent-up rage out of my system. If these sharks wanted a piece of me, I was fucking *ready*.

I yanked my gun off my back and pulled myself out of the algae, but the sons of bitches just swam on by.

And we kept on marching submarineward in silence.

Chapter VIII.

FOUR THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE PACIFIC.

Whatever. Some pent-up rage was probably good for me anyway. I mean, if your heart's going to be full of something 24-7, it might as well be HELLFIRE. If the entire, stupid underwater hike did anything useful for me, though, it gave me some perspective on the whole spycatcher mission. Yeah, there were probably reasons that whoever wrote that message on the window was being all clandestine about it, but fuck 'em. Even if I revealed myself as an outsider to the whole damned crew of dialog-free background characters, what was the book going to do, throw sharks at me?

It was time for me to grill the number one prime suspect, which of course was Nemo. In Oz, the futhermucking Wizard was from the real world (if you could even call the San Fernando Valley in the 1980s that, I mean) so it stood to reason that if anybody here was an actual person, it would be the old dude who the plot centered around, who seemed like he had a lot of his own shit going on.

The next morning, after sleeping for three hundred hours and cramming eight pounds of fish fillets into my gut without chewing, I joined Mustache Guy up on the submarine roof during our daily jaunt to the surface to refill the air tanks. This time when he called out in Submarinish, however, twenty dudes scrambled up on deck and started hauling up fishing nets. So it seemed like that whole hide-the-crew-from-the-newbies thing was over. I inspected their faces to see if a couple of them might be trans, or extrabutch lesbians or something—anything to bring even a *smidgeon* of gender diversity to this book—but as far as I could tell they were all just standard issue dudebros. At least they seemed to represent a whole mess of different ethnicities, which, considering that this thing was set like two fucking years after slavery ended in the United States, wasn't nothing.

I was about to leave them to it, since the stench from a metric ton of still-flopping-around fish is *no joke*, but then Captain Nemo popped up out of the hatch and joined us.

"Look at this ocean, Professor! Doesn't it have the actual gift of life? Doesn't it experience both anger and affection? Last evening it went to sleep just as we did, and there it is, waking up after a peaceful night."

"Sure," I said. "That water is just regular folks."

"See," he went on, "it's waking up under the sun's caresses! It owns a pulse and arteries, it has spasms and a circulation as real as the circulation of blood in animals."

Apparently, the guy just wanted to talk about ocean blood—if I was going to get anything useful out of him, I was clearly going to have to broach the subject myself. But in a *subtle* way, since spies could be anywhere—we were within earshot of two dozen sweaty sailors and a hundred thousand dying fish.

"I'm really enjoying my time on your boat, by the way," I said. "Even though stuff here is pretty different from my normal life on land. *Really* different. Like, I might as well be from a *whole other century*, caught up in a *book* about submarines which had somehow *magically become real*."

Like I said, *subtle*. Nemo, however, just kept staring out at the sea, and continued his monologue.

"Yes, the ocean owns a genuine circulation, and to start it going, the Creator of All Things has only to increase its heat, salt, and microscopic animal life." He went on a whole diatribe about salt and evaporation and water freezing at the poles, and I swear to God I tried to pay as close attention as I could just in case there was some kind of secret message encoded in there, but I was bored into defeat in well under two minutes.

"Sure, sure," I said when I finally found a place to get a word in edgewise. "Evaporation science is fucking *rad*. But... okay, I know I'm a technically a prisoner here, and like I said before, I'm super chill with that. But do you ever, like... *miss* dry land? And ponder specific ways that you could return to your old life that *wasn't* a magical submarine book?"

"Return? Bah!" He gestured toward the sea. "Out there lies true existence! I can imagine the founding of nautical towns, clusters of underwater households that, like the *Nautilus*, would return to the surface of the sea to breathe each morning. Free towns if ever there were, independent cities! Then again, who knows whether some tyrant..."

He drifted off, seeming to grow somber at the thought of land tyrants, and just stared at the water for a bit. "Professor Aronnax," he said at last. "Do you know the depth of the ocean floor?"

I looked him right in the eyes, gave him a finger-gun, and said, "Twenty thousand leagues."

He paused, cocked an eyebrow, and took a sharp breath like he was about to speak, then just turned around and left, disappearing through the hatch. So basically, that whole ordeal got me exactly nowhere.

Nemo made himself scarce over the next few days, and Conseil, Ned, and I settled back into our looking at fish and waiting to be fed routine. Since that the crew was no longer trying to stay out of sight, that was also the part where I learned how much (supergay) sex "goes down" on a submarine. (Just in case you were wondering, it's *a lot*.) From what I picked up, they referred to the whole practice as "sea shanties," and often it would actually start out as one guy playing a guitar or accordion and singing about how dumb girls were, and then segue into a full-blown, gross-pun-fully-intended seaman orgy. Alternately, the sex could crop up totally casually, just between two bored crewmen at any minute. None of them tried to hide it. But if you weren't into that particular kind of porn (I assure you that if your curiosity is mostly academic, it gets old pretty fast), you got fairly adept at averting your eyes and letting it fade into the background.

Three things worth mentioning happened during that particular stretch of tedium, and I'm just going to do bullet points.

The first was that the *Nautilus* floated right up to a busted-up ship that had actively been sinking for a couple of hours and was still floating downward. We got to see the corpses of four people who had strapped themselves to the deck, presumably to keep themselves from being washed out to sea before the sinking started, and it was the second worst thing I wound up witnessing in the whole book. Technically, it was five corpses, because one of them was a woman, arms stuck above her head, trying to hold her infant child above water while it desperately clung to her hair.

So in a book that literally had NO FEMALE CHARACTERS IN IT, they still managed to kill a woman just to make the reader feel bad. Fuck you, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. I spent some time trying to figure out if it was supposed to be commentary on the dangers of letting womenfolk travel by boat or just your typical grimdark bullshit, but eventually, I just let it go.

The second thing that happened was Captain Nemo making a rare appearance and coyly trying to get me to tell him all the details of some famous shipwreck mystery that I guess everybody in 1867 knew about. Of course, I refused to play along, since I definitely didn't know the story. So he pouted some, showed us a barnacle-encrusted tin with a bunch of old papers in it that apparently solved the mystery, and stormed off to sulk.

The third thing that happened was that Conseil came up to meet me on the roof during an air break, which was where I liked to chill every morning to remind myself that the entire world wasn't the inside of a super-swanky tin can.

"Will Master allow me to wish him a happy new year?" he asked.

"New year? What are you even talking about?" I said. "It was November sixteenth like four days ago."

"Master is correct that the days aboard this craft pass one after another so rapidly that they might not have passed at all," he said. "Nevertheless, I would offer Master all the blessings of the heavens on the dawning of whatever strange year awaits us."

That was when I realized that I was *skipping days*. Back on Mars, at the very end, I did this weird fast-forward thing where I woke up nine years later and was all confused about it. Now I was apparently just skipping bits here and there in between plot points.

I had mixed feelings about it, to be honest. I mean, the days were already boring enough as it was, so stretching the last few of them into six entire weeks would certainly have driven me mad. And in previous books, I would probably have been excited that I was moving toward the end of the story as quickly as possible. But that was when I still hoped I would get to go home afterward. If the only thing that was waiting for me was another shitty adventure, what were the chances it would be much, *much* worse than a dull, underwater pleasure cruise?

My gaze returned to the horizon. "Well, then happy new year, Conseil." I paused for a moment, realizing that I had absolutely no idea what happiness meant to Conseil. "What would that look like for you, anyway? Staying here on the submarine? Escaping back to France, or Belgium or wherever?"

"Ye gods, I hardly know what to tell Master. We're certainly seeing some unusual things, and for two months we've had no time for boredom." Wow, his definition of that word was *much* different than mine. "The latest

wonder is always the most astonishing, and if this progression keeps up, I can't imagine what its climax will be. Therefore, with all due respect to Master, I think a 'happy year' would be a year that lets us continue this journey."

"Fair enough," I said.

"On the other hand, Ned Land's thoughts are exactly the opposite of mine," he said. "He's tired of staring at fish and eating them day in and day out. This shortage of wine, bread, and meat isn't suitable for an upstanding Anglo-Saxon, a man accustomed to beefsteak and unfazed by regular doses of brandy or gin."

His tone was sarcastic, or course, but there were notes of something else in there as well. Fondness? *Maybe?* For those of us not hitting the fast-forward button regularly at bedtime, the submarine voyage had apparently taken a good month and a half already. Was it possible that we were much closer to hate-fuck o'clock than I thought? Or even, I don't know, *regular-fuck o'clock*? Conseil's thoughts *did* immediately turn to Ned when I asked him what he wanted out of life. Either way, he fell silent, so I could return to my whale watching, or whatever I thought I was doing staring out to sea.

However, we were finally due for something that felt a bit more like actual plot.

Ned bounded up the ladder with some maps and charts, all excited that we were about to navigate the Torres Strait (which meant nothing to me, but I smiled and nodded). It was the very place where that mystery shipwreck had happened and getting through it without sinking was a big deal for a ship. The *Nautilus* would have to go through on the surface of the water, which made sense, because if regular ships ran ashore just trying to squeeze through, there probably wasn't a ton of depth to dive into.

My companions spent the next few hours comparing the maps to the surrounding islands, gasping incredulously if the *Nautilus* decided to hug the shore instead of sailing through open water when they expected it to. I guess Nemo knew the secret *good* way through the Torres Strait.

"That damned captain must really be sure of his course," Ned said. "Because if these clumps of coral so much as brush us, they'll rip our hull into a thousand pieces!" I got bored and went to get lunch, but when I returned to the roof, they were still at it.

And sure as shit, with a loud, metallic scraping sound, the *Nautilus* screeched to a halt. We had been powering along at its minimum speed, but

I was almost tossed into the drink anyway. Ned hurried to the edge of the platform but couldn't see anything through the choppy water. He started to ruminate about how much damage we might have sustained and how long we could be stuck there, which gave me an idea.

Waiting for the book to end on its own definitely wasn't going to get me home. But if I wanted to fight against the plot, sitting around and refusing to participate was probably pointless as well—Professor Aronnax was the most boring, passive action adventure hero *ever*, and I was confident the book would just keep happening around me regardless of what I did or didn't do on that submarine. Which meant that, as much as I was grateful for all the fish, maybe it was time to test Ned's whole escape thing. At the very least, I could poke Captain Nemo to get a sense of how badly he wanted to keep us on board.

I found him in the steering bubble, conversing with Mustache Guy in their fake language.

"What's up?" I asked. "Had a little accident?"

"Not an accident," he insisted. "An incident."

"Okay. An incident that kind of broke your boat, though, right?"

"No, Professor Aronnax, the *Nautilus* isn't consigned to perdition. It will still carry you through the midst of the ocean's wonders. Our voyage is just beginning, and I've no desire to deprive myself so soon of the pleasure of your company."

So as far as he was concerned, chapters and chapters of fishgazing awaited us. Good.

"Yeah, but how long are we going to be stuck here?"

"In the Torres Strait, one still finds a meter-and-a-half difference in level between high and low seas. In five days, the moon will be full, and I'll be quite astonished if that good-natured satellite doesn't sufficiently raise these masses of water and do me a favor for which I'll be forever grateful."

Five days. For all I knew, that time would skip right by overnight, so if I was going to pull something, I'd better try it soon.

"What if Ned, Conseil, and me went and checked out some of these islands while we're here, then?" To my surprise, he was fine with it. He told me we were free to row ashore in the *Nautilus*'s canoe and do whatever we wanted for the rest of the week.

Well, crap. If it was as easy as that, a trip to the shore at this point in the book was probably what was *supposed* to happen, and not me cleverly

finding a way to go off-script that stopped short of wholesale slaughter.
Also, after however many months of horrible Martian desert camping, I had *reeeeeeeaaaaaally* gotten used to sleeping in a nice, soft bed again.
Ugh.

Chapter IX.

SOME DAYS ASHORE.

Well, fuck it. The nearest island was only a half an hour away on the rowboat thing, so unless some unforeseen escape opportunity did present itself, I had every intention of returning to the submarine each night to sleep. We set out first thing the following morning, with Conseil and me on rowing duty and Ned steering, which was fine, considering that I apparently hadn't been off that submarine for almost two months and clearly needed the exercise.

"Meat!" Ned kept repeating while we rowed. "Now we'll eat red meat! Actual game! A real mess call, by thunder! I'm not saying fish aren't good for you, but we mustn't overdo 'em, and a slice of fresh venison grilled over live coals will be a nice change from our standard fare."

"You glutton," Conseil said. "You're making my mouth water."

I hadn't skipped breakfast or anything, but he was actually making me a little hungry as well. Rowing is *hard*. "Unless this is the part where we get ironically attacked by meat that wants to eat *us*," I said.

It didn't put a dent in Ned's enthusiasm. "Professor Aronnax, if there's no other quadruped on this island, I'll eat tiger sirloin." We were armed with both axes and magic electricity rifles, so tigers beware, I guess.

Even though I'd only been on the *Nautilus* for maybe two weeks by my internal clock, setting foot on dry land was weirdly invigorating. Ned strode ashore as if he were claiming the island for Mother Canada, and Conseil bounded after him like a puppy. Soon the two of them were beating coconuts out of trees, cracking them open, and guzzling the fluid inside with glee.

The one time I had tried coconut water, I thought it was disgusting, so I left them to it, and soon they were cramming as many coconuts as they could find into the boat. If I didn't know for sure that this book was set *way*

before Gilligan's Island, I would have suspected that they were hoping to build ham radios and shit out of them.

"Let us continue our excursion," Conseil said. "But carefully—this island seems uninhabited, but still might harbor certain individuals less finicky than Mr. Land about the sort of game they eat."

"You wound me, Conseil," Ned said. "Although I do admit that after two months with nothing but seafood, I'm starting to appreciate the charms of cannibalism myself."

"Ned! Don't say that! Why, I'll no longer be safe next to you, I who share your cabin! Does this mean I'll wake up half devoured one day?"

"I'm awfully fond of you, Conseil my friend, but not enough to eat you when there's better food around."

Yeah, *something* was going on with the two of them. They were actually kind of *adorable* together.

"Then I daren't delay," Conseil replied. "We must bag some game to placate this man-eater, or one of these mornings Master won't find enough pieces of his manservant left to serve him."

As much as he'd been going on about meat, the next thing we ran into was a crop of trees that bore something called breadfruit—gnarly, yellowish, oval things—and the big harpooner absolutely *lost his shit*.

"I'll die if I don't sample a little breadfruit pasta," he insisted.

"Knock yourself out, dude."

He made a quick fire out of driftwood and a magnifying glass and was soon laying thick slices of fruit over burning branches.

"You'll see, Sir, how tasty this bread is," Ned said. "Especially since we've gone without baked goods for so long. In fact, it's *more* than just bread. It's a *dainty pastry*. Have you ever eaten any?"

I looked at his cooking fire sideways. Don't get me wrong, I'd eaten more exotic crap during my book travels than you can even imagine, but he was selling this awfully hard. "Nope."

"All right, get ready for something downright delectable. If you don't come back for seconds, I'm no longer the King of Harpooners."

After a few minutes, the parts of the fruit exposed to the fire were completely toasted, and the inside was sort of artichoke-flavored and did have a texture a lot like bread. It was legit delicious, and I had *thirds*.

"Unfortunate that it can't possibly stay fresh, so it seems pointless to make a supply to bring aboard," Conseil said.

"By thunder, Sir!" Ned exclaimed. "There you go, talking like a naturalist, but meantime I'll be acting like a *baker*! I'll make a fermented batter from its pulp that'll keep indefinitely, and when I want some, I'll just cook it in the galley—it'll have a slightly tart flavor, but you'll find it excellent."

"Oh my *God*," I sputtered, my mouth still full. "Could you make a *pie crust* out of this stuff?"

Ned's eyes grew wide. "If we were to find some game to fill it with, I daresay it would be worth the effort to try." My throat made a kind of involuntary Homer Simpson noise.

"Venison baked in a *pie*?" Conseil said. "I've never had the pleasure of sampling the famed French Canadian *tourtiere*, but how can such a delicacy hold a candle to the exquisite banquets we're served nightly aboard the *Nautilus*?"

"Nooooooo," I said. "Conseil, *you have to try the meat pie.*" This was the best thing that had happened to me since Sherlock Holmes, *at least*.

We kept on for the rest of the day and didn't even find any animals to shoot at, but my spirits were still high, and we rowed back to the submarine on a boat piled high with a whole bunch of different fruits around nightfall. The *Nautilus* was seemingly deserted again, but dinner was waiting in our rooms, so it was fine.

The next day the submarine was still empty, but all those guys disappeared into the secret locked parts on a fairly regular basis, so it really wasn't that big of a deal. Anyway, the rowboat was all ready to go, and day two was *meat day*, so we headed out once again. I have to admit that Ned had completely won me over, and now I was drooling right alongside him.

We headed for a different section of the forest, and for hours the only fauna we encountered were parrots, which we left alive, even though Ned insisted that they were delicious if prepared correctly. Then we ran across these big, beautiful bird of paradise sons of bitches, and Ned used up most of our ammunition without hitting anything.

"I admit I'm handier with a harpoon than a rifle," he said, dejected.

"Perhaps I'll have more luck," Conseil said. He wandered off into the trees in the direction the birds had fled. He didn't bother to bring a gun with him, so apparently, he was going to try bagging one with some kind of Flemish kung fu shit.

That left Ned and me waiting for him. "So," I said. "You and Conseil. How's *that* going?"

"Conseil?" he asked. "I do admit that I've grown quite fond of the gallant lad."

"You mean, fond, or, like *fond* fond?" I wasn't sure how Ned would react to my insinuation, so I figured it was time for some more of my patented subtlety. "You know what I mean by *fond*?"

He smiled. "I presume you've been exposed to our crew's enthusiastic propensity for the old nautical tradition of the sea shanty."

"Yes! Exactly! Like, sea shanty fond."

His smile faded. "I'm not at all opposed to the practice, and may even indulge myself from time to time, but I think the shanty is not for a man such as Conseil."

"Are you kidding? I've gotten to know him pretty well, and I feel like the shanty is *exactly* for a man such as Conseil."

He looked off into the distance, and spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "A man such as Conseil might find as much joy in the dance as any sailor long at sea, its true. But an emotionless entanglement is not what his heart truly desires. What it desires is to twirl and twirl with his partner on and anon, and if one dance did not lead to a lifetime of them, I fear it would tear his gentle heart asunder. I would not wish such pain upon the deadliest humpback, much less a man I call friend."

Aw. Between that and yesterday's baking freakout, I liked island Ned way better than submarine Ned.

Just then, Conseil made kind of a small, gleeful shout from somewhere out in the trees and came bounding back into view carrying a magnificent-ass green and purple bird in his arms.

"Fuckin'-A, Conseil," I said. I immediately realized that "Fuckin'-A" probably wasn't in the general parlance in 1860s France or whatever, but he replied with a blushing "Master is too kind," so the tone seemed to be enough to carry the sentiment.

"If Master will examine the bird closely, he'll see that I deserve no great praise. In fact, this bird is drunk as a lord."

"Drunk?" Ned asked.

"Yes, drunk from the nutmegs it was devouring under the tree where I caught it. See, Ned my friend, the monstrous results of intemperance!"

"Damnation!" Ned shot back. "Considering the amount of gin I've had these past two months, you've got nothing to complain about!"

While they were busy with their old-married-couple routine, I poked at the bird with my finger. It was definitely still alive but did seem quite sedated. "So… what? Do we *eat* it?"

"Master!" Conseil said, aghast. "Certainly not! Surely we must take it with us, and make it a gift to the zoo at the Botanical Gardens in Paris, which doesn't own a single live specimen."

Ned eyed the bird sideways. "Any hopes of escape would certainly be shaved in half with a wild bird in tow," he said. "And it *is* meat day..."

"Heavens, Ned," Conseil muttered. "If it's breakfast you're after surely we can make do with something a bit more common." He grabbed his rifle from the tree he had propped it up against and fired two quick shots into the canopy. A pair of grey pigeon-y looking birds dropped out of it, crackling with electricity from the magic bullets.

Ned's jaw hit the ground.

"When so many of your shots missed their mark, I assumed you were trying to *wing them*," Conseil said. "If I had known you were simply wanting a meal, we might have already finished eating by now."

If Ned Land was at all angered by Conseil's burn, it didn't show. He got right to cleaning and cooking the birds, and we were devouring greasy (but tasty) chicken snacks in no time. Once we had finished, Ned returned to the hunt with singular focus, and by the end of the day, he had proved his manliness by bagging a wild boar and about a dozen rabbit-sized miniature kangaroos.

Miniature *kangaroos*? Where the fuck *was* this island? It was apparently supposed to be January, but the weather was nice, and the sun was just setting at around 6:00 when we made it back to the beach for dinner, which I guess would have given me some clues if I had the slightest idea what any of that implied in terms of geography. Regardless, though, I hadn't even known that miniature kangaroos were a *thing*.

Ned insisted that they were *unbelievable* when stewed.

That evening we lounged around the fire and feasted on roast pork, breadfruit, mangoes, and pineapple, and Conseil and Ned drank some kind of partially-fermented coconut thing that smelled rank but seemed to make them happy. It felt like a vacation.

In fact, the more I thought about it, this *whole book* kind of felt like a vacation. Sure, I was trapped there, but I could basically just sit back in the lap of luxury and participate or not participate as much as I cared to on any given day, while being plied with sumptuous meals, and the submarine just floated on, toward whatever was even supposed to pass for plot. Not that I had ever been on board a cruise ship, but from what I could tell, the *Nautilus* was EXACTLY like being on a cruise ship.

The truth was, if you were going to be held prisoner forever in crappy, hundred-year-old books, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was probably the most comfortable prison you could hope for. Not that I had ever actually read one, but based on my experiences so far, I had to kind of dread what might come next. You know who could definitely tell you which public domain classics would make the best vacation spots, though? *Madeline*. She would have a whole top-five list already figured out—two, in fact, one ranked by location and one ranked by how much she wanted to hang out with the characters.

Holy shit—what if this whole thing was supposed to be for Madeline, and they captured me by mistake? It would make so much sense.

Conseil was splayed out on the sand. "What if we don't return to the *Nautilus* this evening?" He said. He sounded a little tipsy, so the coconut ass-water was doing its job.

"What if we *never* return to it?" Ned asked.

Just then, a polished stone whizzed through the air and hit the sand near the fire between us.

Conseil sat upright, and a second rock smacked into his coconut cup, knocking it right out of his hand.

"Savages!" he howled.

Chapter X.

THE LIGHTNING BOLTS OF CAPTAIN NEMO.

Shit. First of all, THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MY VACATION BOOK. And second, this was *definitely* the part where things were going to get *racist as fuck*. I mean, the flabbergasting sexism of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was so baked-in that women basically didn't even exist in its world, so I hadn't had to deal with it on anything other than a theoretical level. But century-old books were *always* racist. Again, technically I had never read one, but so far, I had lived through two or three, and I can tell you that even the Sherlock Holmes story was full of bad opinions and ethnic slurs about Romani people.

"Head for the skiff!" Ned shouted. The worst thing about book-racism is that you can't just roll your eyes and explain that non-white people don't just run around constantly trying to eat white people. Because if the author *thinks* they do, then they absolutely do in the world he created, and fleeing and murder are basically your only two options.

In this case, I was more than happy to pick fleeing. Ned was unwilling to leave behind the meat, so he clutched his bloody pig carcass under one arm and as many tiny kangaroos as he could manage under the other and scampered off toward the boat. (The Bird of Paradise, you'll be happy to know, had already sobered up and wandered off at some point during our meal.)

We shoved off, rowed like mad, and were a good thousand feet out to sea by the time we could see natives wade into the surf and shake their spears at us in the moonlight.

We made the thirty-minute trip back to the submarine in a tight twenty. The place still looked abandoned, but we could hear music wafting through

the corridors, and found Nemo in the main lounge, sitting at the keyboard in a kind of musical organ-trance.

"Dude," I said. He completely ignored me, so I poked him in the back. "Dude!"

His shoulders trembled, and he finally turned around.

"Ah, it is you, Professor! Well, did you have a happy hunt?"

"All too fruitful," Ned interjected. He was, for the record, still carrying his meat. "In fact, I fear we attracted altogether more attention than we intended. We were attacked by savages!"

"Savages?" Nemo replied. "Where on the surface world *aren't* there savages? Are they any worse than elsewhere, these people you call *savages*?"

Ned stammered a bit. "Whatever you call them, there were at least a hundred, and irate enough that if they have any sort of seafaring craft, you'll be able to judge them for yourself soon enough."

"My dear boy," Nemo said. "If every islander on Papua were to gather on that beach, the *Nautilus* would still have nothing to fear from their attacks."

He turned back to his organ and started playing, exclusively on the *black* keys, which was maybe supposed to be some sort of heavy-handed symbolism about race relations, but struck me as medium-hilarious, because that was exactly how I knew how to play the lone piece of music I could accomplish on the piano, "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Mostly, I was just impressed that the main—I don't know, antagonist or *frenemy*, or whatever the hell Captain Nemo was supposed to be—in this book had just lectured us on *not being racist*. Although technically I guess his point was that Europeans were *just as bad* as the heathens, not that there was anything particularly redeeming about non-white people. Also, it kind of made sense, since the captain was sort of ambiguously South Asian himself. Still, I was pretty sure *the author* wasn't, so the whole thing was fairly unexpected. Shit, maybe this *was* my vacation book after all.

The next morning, I wandered up to the roof platform, where the hatches were wide open to let in our daily allotment of fresh air. I popped my head out and found that the islanders hadn't forgotten about us. In fact, many of them had taken advantage of the low tide and were perched on coral reefs less than a thousand feet away from the *Nautilus*. Way off in the

distance, I could see a crowd on the beach that must have swollen to at least five or six hundred.

The ones on the nearby rocks were mostly naked, but considering the months I had spent on Barsoom, that would hardly have shocked me, even if they had been close enough for me to make out their junk. A few of them wore what looked like grass skirts—wait, were those *women* islanders, bravely venturing over precarious reefs alongside their male counterparts? I mean, I still didn't trust this book enough to assume they weren't risking their lives because they straight-up wanted to eat us, but still. Hashtag cannibals, hashtag feminism.

The islanders made their way back to shore later in the morning as the tide rose, and Ned was apparently planning to spend most of his day preparing various meat and flour products in the kitchen. We still had a full day before the tides would rise enough to free the ship, so I was back to abject boredom. Sometime around mid-afternoon, I ran across Conseil, headed toward the roof with a fishing net. He had his rifle with him as well, and even though the islanders were now well off on shore, I remembered the casual skill with which he brought down those pigeons and shuddered.

He must have seen the revulsion in my expression. "Master may be assured the weapon is entirely in case of the most dire emergency!" he said. "After all, between Europeans and savages, it's acceptable for Europeans to shoot back, but not to attack first."

That was, sporting, at least, I guess. "And at any rate," he continued, "with all due respect, these savages don't strike me as very wicked."

I smiled. "You're not worried they're going to eat you?"

"A person can be both a cannibal and a decent man," he said. "Just as a person can be both gluttonous and honorable. One does not exclude the other."

It was kind of a weird defense of cannibalism, but as far as not being racist in the 1860s went, I would take it. Also, "gluttonous and honorable" was *definitely* in regards to a specific Canadian. Conseil went on to spend the better part of two hours dragging a bunch of crap up out of the water with his net to categorize, and I just kind of chilled up there with him since I had nothing better to do. Just as I was about to wander off and see if Ned had cooked up anything worthwhile out of meat, though, Conseil pulled some random shell out of his net and absolutely *lost his mind*.

"It's from the species Oliva, order Pectinibranchia, class Gastropoda, branch Mollusca," he said. Then he held it out for me to get a closer look. "But see? Instead of coiling from right to left, this olive shell rolls *from left to right*!"

I had never seen Conseil so utterly enraptured. "No way," I said.

"Yes, Master! Yes! It's a *left-handed shell*!" Apparently, it was the four-leaf clover of seashells, and Conseil solemnly swore that he would donate it to the Paris Museum rather than selling it on the open market for at least its weight in gold.

I allowed myself to get swept up in his glee, to the point where neither of us saw the approaching canoes or the polished stone that rocketed toward us and shattered the invaluable prize right out of Conseil's hands.

He pounced on his rifle and swung it toward the canoe full of islanders just thirty feet from us.

"What? No!" I shouted. Conseil fired his weapon, and an ornate armband one of the islanders was wearing shattered. It was enough to shield him from the bullet's velocity and its electric shock, though, because he just loaded his sling for another shot.

I grabbed Conseil and pulled him into the hatch. "Dude!" I said.

He was distraught. "Didn't Master see? He initiated the attack!"

"A fancy shell isn't worth killing a guy!"

We managed to get the hatches closed behind us as a hail of rocks rained down above us. "Oh, the rascal!" Conseil howled mournfully. "That shell would have been the crown jewel of Master's entire lifetime of discovery. I'd rather he cracked my shoulder!"

Aww. "It's okay, buddy. Uh, maybe we should go tell Captain Nemo about the canoes?"

Conseil wanted to spend some time alone with his sorrow and murderrage, so I went off to find Nemo alone. He wasn't in the lounge, but the door to his bedroom was open.

"Hey," I said, poking my head inside. "Got a minute?"

He was dicking around with a map and, like, a compass or whatever. "No, but I imagine you have pressing reasons for looking me up?"

I had to admire his bitch face. "Just thought you'd want to know that the islanders have canoes, and they're pretty much camped out on the roof now."

"Close the hatches, then. I don't imagine you're worried that these gentlemen will stave in walls that shells from your frigate couldn't breach?"

"No, but we don't leave until tomorrow afternoon, right? Won't we have to open up for air again before then?"

"And you assume they'll board the ship? Well, Sir, then let them come aboard. Deep down, they're just poor devils, and I don't want my visit to Gueboroa Island to cost the life of a single one of these unfortunate people."

Huh. Well, fair enough. I was ready to leave, but Nemo was in the mood for conversation, and we chatted pleasantly for a while about how our hunting trip had gone. Nemo's mind was clearly elsewhere, though.

"Do you know, Professor, what my thoughts often turn to at moments like these?"

"I don't know, hiring some fucking women for your boat?"

He looked at me like I'd grown a second head, and I realized that he might have thought I meant "hire some fucking-women." Which would be roughly eighty times more vile than just ignoring women altogether, and also probably homophobic, considering the nature of the fucking his crew was doubtlessly and enthusiastically doing somewhere onboard that very moment.

"Uh, nevermind," I said with a cringe. "You were saying? Your thoughts turn to...?"

"Captain Dumont d'Urville," he said. Who, I remembered, was the guy from that big shipwreck mystery Nemo had been all excited about a few days before. "He was one of your great seamen," Nemo continued, "the Frenchman's Captain Cook. Braving the ice banks of the South Pole, the coral of Oceania, the cannibals of the Pacific—if that energetic man was able to think about his life in its last seconds, imagine what his final thoughts must have been."

"Yeah, crazy," I said. "That guy wrecked his boat right around these parts too, right?"

Nemo gave me a look that could have boiled water. "The *Nautilus* is not *wrecked*. The *Nautilus* was built to rest on the ocean floor, and I hardly need to undertake the arduous labors d'Urville had to attempt in order to float off his sloops of war. My *Nautilus* is in no danger! Tomorrow. On the day stated and the hour stated, the tide will peacefully lift it off! As stated!"

"Okay," I said. "I get it. Relax."

"Tomorrow," he repeated, standing, "tomorrow at 2:40 in the afternoon, the *Nautilus* will float off and exit the Torres Strait undamaged!" He gave me a quick, somehow *angry* bow and then just stared at me silently, which I guess was my cue to leave. So, for anyone keeping score, Captain Nemo was less actively racist than most people you find in in century-old literature, but SUPER god-damned touchy about his navigation skills.

Conseil ran to greet me in the hallway, out of breath. "Master! Our friend Ned is concocting a kangaroo pie that is certain to be the eighth wonder!"

I actually couldn't tell if he was fucking with me or not. I followed him to the mess hall, though, where Ned had in fact prepared *two* pies—one for him, and one for me and Conseil to share. Conseil ate two bites and pronounced it utterly magnificent—again, really riding that line between perfect sincerity and just being an asshole—but ceded the remainder of the pie to me, so I was fine either way. And I have no idea if eating a kangaroo is like feasting on bald eagles to Australians, or if they're skinning and devouring the sons of bitches five days a week, but if it's not the second one, IT SHOULD BE. Kangaroos are *delicious*, you guys. Maybe the tiny ones are extra tender or maybe Ned Land just has magical kangaroo marinating techniques, but DAMN. Easily one of my top five all-time meat pies. Swear to god.

Something was bugging me, though, so I gave my sincerest compliments to the chef (who was in the middle of some kind of you-said-you-liked-my-pie-but-didn't-act-like-you-liked-my-pie spat with Conseil, so barely noticed) and headed off to bed. Sleep didn't come easy with the sounds of islanders stomping and banging spear shafts against the submarine roof pretty much straight through till morning.

And that was the issue. This whole thing with Nemo being super chill about encroaching natives was *leading to something*, and I wasn't eager to find out what. Sure, it might be the part of the book where all the islanders join us for tea and we learn that 1860s-era Papua New Guineans are the most erudite and morally upright of all the world's cannibals, but my kangaroo-filled guts told me it wasn't likely.

And I couldn't get the memory of freshly-murdered Martians falling, dozen after dozen, from burning, plummeting airships out of my mind.

It was not fucking great.

The next day I thought about hiding out in my room and just skipping the whole thing. Finally, though, I decided that if plot was going to happen, it was probably going to find me one way or the other, and after my second meal of the day was delivered to me in bed (lunch was another thing that tended to find you one way or another on that boat), I headed for the hatches to find out whether this was supposed to be my vacation book or just another torture cruise. The air was getting stale—which happened on occasion if we postponed morning hatch time—and I was in a terrible mood.

Nemo was there, of course, along with Conseil and Ned and a dozen crewman (I hadn't gotten as much as a hello out of any of these guys yet, but I did recognize Rando Johnson from underwater hiking day among them).

"I've given orders to open the hatches," Nemo said. He was being all smug and self-congratulatory about it, and I remembered his insistence about not killing any islanders. Still, it wasn't *his* intentions I was worried about. It was Jules fucking Verne (or H.G. fucking Wells, or ORSON fucking Wells, or whatever dead white guy wrote this book—like I said, at the time I didn't know all that much about *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*). Rando and two other guys went to the big spinny hatchmechanism wheel. The sky opened up above us, revealing maybe twenty angrily curious faces.

And I will tell you straight-up that among them was the single hottest guy I have ever seen in my entire life. His face was *angelic*, and he wore threaded earrings and a glass bead necklace and no shirt at all (pantslessness also assumed although I couldn't see his nether regions through the hatch). He was lean but immaculately muscled—*chill* muscles that gently contoured his torso, not the veiny, shredded gym kind—and he wasn't at all sweaty like you'd expect from someone who spent all night stomping on a submarine. His skin looked *soft*. He looked like he *smelled good*.

And that was it. For the whole book. There would be no Tin Man with his gyrating robot hips, no twin quasars of Kantos Kan and Dejah Thoris. Not even weird, mustachey, devoted Watson triggering my hormones in a way that no one I had met on the *Nautilus* possibly could. This molten-hot, miscellaneous islander was my one and only crush during the entire,

seemingly endless voyage, for about four entire seconds until he laid his hand on the *Nautilus*'s inner railing.

Then he was flung into the air by some invisible force, possibly directly into a canoe, since I could year his terrified howls fade slowly into the distance.

A dozen of his friends grabbed the railing after he did and were met with the exact same fate. Then Ned Land—who was nothing if not a magnificent dumbass—bounded up the stairway in some sort of testosterone-fueled fugue state and was thrown backward onto the deck.

"Damnation!" he howled. "I've been struck by a lightning bolt!"

And that was it. High tide lifted the submarine off the reef just as anticipated, and, oxygen replenished, we battened down the hatches and sailed away, with Ned angrily harrumphing and being too manly to accept any aid.

The more I thought about it, not having anyone to go all hormonal over was actually a kind of vacation of its own, and that business with Ned Land getting his ass shocked all to hell in full-on action hero mode was downright *magical*.

This might actually be the best vacation book *ever*.

Chapter XI.

AEGRI SOMNIA.

But of course it wasn't. It *categorically* wasn't. Remember how there was a spy somewhere on the submarine scrawling invisible messages in Sharpie and sending me presents of clean underwear? Well, that whole subplot was about to rear its head in roughly the shittiest way imaginable.

I settled back into my routine, and I'm pretty sure I fast forwarded through at least a week over the next couple of days. Which was fine with me—if the most exciting thing that happened while I was awake was Nemo rambling about the relative density of salt water, I can't even fucking IMAGINE what kind of tedium I *slept* through.

I was up on the roof the next(ish) morning for briefly-not-trapped-in-aniron-box time, and Mustache First Officer Guy wandered up to scan the horizon with his telescope, as was his custom. In all the days we'd seen each other up there, he had never spoken a word to me.

"It's Mustache First Officer Guy, right?" I asked, sticking out a hand. "I'm Arrrrrrr...onnax?"

It was a *pretty* smooth save, but probably unnecessary—I was sure nobody onboard (except for *maybe* Conseil) knew what my actual first name was supposed to be, and "Arabella Aronnax" was probably a perfectly acceptable name for an 1860s French professor guy regardless.

He ignored me completely and turned to yell some made-up gibberish down the stairs. This time, though, it was *different* made-up gibberish. Every single day this guy yelled the exact same thing into the submarine, but today he switched it up. And he sounded agitated, too—at first, I assumed that it translated into "OMG, the French guy is talking to me, help."

Captain Nemo rushed up the stairs, and the two of them took turns looking through the telescope, pacing back and forth, and probably cursing in Submarinish.

"So, uh, what's up guys?"

They both just turned and exited down the hatch without saying a word to me. Well, whatever. I happened to know that there were a whole bunch of perfectly good telescopes down in the library room, so I went and fetched one, then pointed in the general direction they had been gesturing toward.

Suddenly, the telescope was snatched out of my hands, and I turned to see Nemo towering over me, *pissed*. His teeth were bared, his face was red, and his hands were balled into fists. The telescope fell and rolled at his feet. He didn't seem like he was angry at *me*, though—in fact, his gaze was fixed on the horizon.

He quickly pulled his shit together. "Professor Aronnax," he said, "I ask that you now honor one of the binding agreements between us."

I didn't even remember that there were binding agreements between us, other than "you're basically my prisoner, sucks to be you."

"You and your companions," he continued, "must be placed in confinement until I see fit to set you free."

Oh, right. *That* binding agreement. "Can I ask why?"

"You may not, Sir."

Four crewmen escorted me down to pick up Conseil and Ned and dumped the lot of us into the jail room where we spent our first day on the *Nautilus*. Ned, of course, was borderline apoplectic, and Conseil maintained his usual chill.

"Will Master tell me what this means?" he asked.

I told them everything I knew, which wasn't a hell of a lot. Then we sat around listening to Ned complain until Schlubby Waiter Guy showed up with breakfast.

"How about you?" I said to the waiter after he had unloaded his cart. I had never heard him utter a single word the entire time I'd been on the ship, even to another crewman. "You got anything to say today?"

He did not, but just as the door was closing between us, he shot me a *crazy*-intense glance and kind of jerked his head a tiny bit like he was gesturing toward something.

Okay, what the hell was *that*? There was nothing in the direction he had nodded except a featureless wall. After eating for a few minutes in silence, Ned let out a loud yawn, which Conseil and I both caught and returned right back to him.

Wait—I didn't usually get sleepy after *breakfast*. This felt more like the *lunch* sleepies. My eyelids grew heavy.

Fuck. Those bastards had drugged us.

And suddenly I was back in that poppy field two books ago. Wait, the Tin Man's a robot—he can save us. Ned! You're the biggest, you breathed in the most of all! Run from this place as fast as you can before it's too late!

I slipped off my stool and was out before I hit the floor.

* * *

I was in my cabin under the covers when I woke up. *Somebody had dragged me back here unconscious*. I screamed and jumped out of bed. Based on the crusty remains of breakfast on my pants, at least no one had undressed me.

As far as I knew. Shit. I peeled off my clothes and checked for bruises and abrasions just to make sure, but found nothing.

As soon as I had finished peeing and putting on fresh boat clothes, there was an urgent knock on the door and Nemo burst into the room.

"What the FUCK, dude?" I said. "What the actual fuck?"

His eyes were red, and he looked exhausted. "Are you a physician, Professor Aronnax?"

"What? No."

"Because several of your colleagues took your scientific degrees in medicine—Gratiolet, Moquin-Tandon... others."

Or maybe I *was* supposed to be a doctor. Back on Mars, I was supposed to be a master swordsman, so when it came time to fight, I just swung my stupid sword around like an asshole and waited for people to impale themselves on the end of it. Maybe the reverse would work too, and I could just kind of throw bandages and shit at motherfuckers until they got better.

"I don't know, *maybe*," I said. "Why?"

Nemo looked as distraught as I had ever seen him. "Would you consent to give your medical attention to one of my men?"

Something was definitely wrong. *Ugh*. "Fine. But I'm still pissed about getting drugged, asshole—we're not done talking about this."

He ignored the second part and led me back into the crew quarters, where a crewman was laying on a cot with his head on a pillow that was almost entirely soaked through with blood.

It was Schlubby Waiter Guy.

His eyes were open, but he didn't acknowledge my presence in any way as I approached him. His head was wrapped loosely with gauze, and I gently peeled some of it back to get a look. It was *bad*. Like, you could see *brains*. I tried to stifle my gasp.

"Hatch," he whispered almost inaudibly as I hesitantly re-positioned the gauze. He was so quiet I was almost certain that Nemo, who was still standing in the doorway, fretting, hadn't heard.

"How did this happen?" I demanded.

"That's not important," Nemo said.

"It is if you want me to fucking help him."

"The *Nautilus* suffered a collision that cracked one of the engine levers. My chief officer was standing beside him, and this man leaped forward to intercept the blow. A brother lays down his life for his brother, a friend for his friend. What could be simpler?"

He was obviously lying. Was there *any way* this was the part of the book where my amazing but previously unmentioned medical skills saved a dude from losing half his skull? I had to at least *try*.

There was a bunch more gauze in a roll at the bedside, so I held my breath and tried to wrap some of it around his head wound. His eyes focused on me at last, and he was definitely hurting, but his expression was wild-eyed rage. It was anger tinged with madness, and the freakiest part was that I *recognized* it.

"Escape hatch," he whispered. "In every book, there's an escape hatch." Holy shit. It was the futhermucking Wizard.

In my defense, it had been an entire book plus a short story since I had seen him last, and without the gross, wispy beard, he just looked like every single middle-aged white guy. But that rage-face was *exactly* the same one he sported when he had been piloting his balloon through tornadoes and begging me to help him find the people who had abducted us both and make them answer for whatever the hell they were even trying to accomplish.

"It's in the maelstrom," he gasped.

Then he died in my arms.

Chapter XII.

A NEW PROPOSITION FROM CAPTAIN NEMO.

We had his funeral the next day, in an underwater cemetery at the bottom of the sea where coral would grow over his grave to prevent sharks from eating the corpse. Later, back on the boat, Nemo had a big, ugly cry.

This is the part in the original book where Part I ends and Part II begins, but I'm going to tell you straight up that the second half is going to go a little quicker, because now I was pissed.

That fucker was right under my nose the entire time—seriously, *he brought me food almost every single day*—and I had never even recognized him. I still didn't know what would happen if I died in a book, but there was a decent chance that I had died already, AT LEAST once. So if I just wound up reincarnated in another idiotic adventure, hopefully the Wizard was cooling his heels in *Sense and Sensibility* or something by now.

Because the alternative was... ugh. *I watched his eyes go glassy*. I heard his fucking *death rattle*. It wasn't something I was going to be getting over any time soon. And it's not like I particularly cared about that guy or anything, but at the end of the day, he was some sorry son of a bitch who'd been shafted exactly the same way I was—worse, because he was trapped in Oz for like three decades.

My stomach sank at just the idea of it. After all, I had no reason to believe I would be getting home any quicker.

Also, what was the Wizard even *doing* here? The last time I had seen him he was in his hot air balloon screaming at the top of his lungs about some invisible hole in the sky that the Secret Book Masters shot tornadoes out of. Did he get sucked into one, and just wake up as a mute waiter on a submarine? It seemed awfully weird that he would be trapped in a book as

such a minor background character—even if he hadn't been the protagonist in Oz, he was at least important enough to have his name in the title.

Or had he made it through the sky hole, found the Secret Masters, and been sent here to *spy on me*?

Assuming he was the one who smuggled in my hoodie—which I pretty much *had* to assume by this point—all his undercover nonsense would make sense if he was being observed by someone on the outside. "*They can only see what's supposed to be here*." They who? Like, Nemo and Ned and those fuckers, or THEY they?

"That's why they send us."

Shit.

One thing I was sure of was that when he said, "escape hatch," he was talking about a secret door in the book itself, which either led home or to the Nefarious Hidden Lair of the Book People. I was pretty sure a "maelstrom" was a big, nasty ocean storm. But considering that a "nautilus" was a *shellfish*, in the context of the story, it could just as easily be what Nemo called some as-yet-unmentioned mini-sub, or a rad nickname for Rando "The Maelstrom" Johnson (that dude was big enough to hide half a dozen secret hatches under his shirt, easy). For the time being, I was just going to have to keep an eye out.

Ned, of course, was concocting escape plans again—we were off the coast of India now, which he deemed plenty civilized enough to escape through (yay, colonialism). And although I was definitely feeling his vibe, I wasn't ready to burn any bridges until I was sure the secret passage out of this thing wasn't hidden right under my nose.

Later that day, we floated past a whole bunch of dead bodies—just regular old poor folks, apparently, who were cast out to sea when they died and whose corpses had not yet been picked clean by vultures—and a whole massive patch of ocean where moonlight reflected off microscopic creatures to make the surface look as white as milk.

Neither sight particularly improved my mood.

The next morning, Nemo tracked me down in the lounge and, without so much as a hello, launched into an entire monologue about how shitty it was to be a pearl diver. (Super shitty, for the record—their noses and ears bled if they held their breath too long, they died young from ulcers and stuff, and they made like a dollar a week, which was crap even for the 1860s.)

He paused, possibly to see if I had any thoughts on the matter. "Yeah, sucks, man," I said. "Was there a point to any of this?"

"The island of Ceylon," he said, "is famous for its pearl fisheries. Would you be interested in visiting one?"

I don't know, are there any MAELSTROMS there? I wasn't in any emotional condition to go down my usual second-guessing-the-plot rabbit hole just then.

"Sure," I said. "One hundred percent."

"Fine. It's easily done. By the way, Professor Aronnax, you aren't afraid of sharks, are you?"

He said it like I was maybe supposed to be, but, remember, in the last book I had killed ten-legged behemoths whose tusks were the size of Oldsmobiles and whatever.

"Naw," I said. "Bring it."

Conseil and Ned were invited to go, too—Ned had suited up for the underwater funeral, so appeared to be over his fear of diving apparatuses—and they joined me in the lounge as soon as Nemo left for a spirited discussion about pearls in general. Conseil was eagerly rambling off the scientific classifications of various pearl-bearing mollusks, but Ned kept steering the conversation back toward the pearls' monetary value.

"I've heard stories," he said, "about some lady in ancient times who drank pearls in vinegar."

"Cleopatra!" Conseil said. "And it must have tasted abominable, but when a little glass of vinegar is worth one and a half million francs, its taste is a small price to pay."

"One and a half million!" Ned exclaimed. "I'm sorry I wasn't the sap who wound up marrying the gal!"

"Ned Land married to Cleopatra? Preposterous!"

Ned pretended to take offense. "Oh, you don't think I'm the marrying sort? But I assure you, I was all set to tie the knot. I even bought a pearl necklace for my fiancée, Kate Tender." Kate Tender, BTW, *definitely* sounded like a real person, and not someone's made-up girlfriend back in Canada. "It only cost me a dollar fifty, but its pearls were so big they would have made Cleopatra jealous."

"My gallant Ned," Conseil laughed. "Those were artificial pearls, ordinary glass beads whose insides were coated in Essence of Orient."

"Huh," Ned said, philosophically. "Maybe *that's* why Kate Tender married somebody else."

Pearl diving wasn't scheduled until the following morning, and we set out well before dawn, on the rowboat for some reason (I had long since quit trying to see the logic of anything boat-related on this journey). Also, I think I might have forgotten to mention to Ned and Conseil that there were going to be sharks. I mean, technically there was no way of knowing if we'd happen to run into any, but based on my knowledge of century-old public domain book foreshadowing, I'd say our chances were hovering around seven hundred percent. We had miscellaneous crewmen to row this time and to help us into our diving suits once we reached Pearl Town, but only Nemo, Conseil, Ned, and I would actually be going underwater.

"Here we are, Professor Aronnax," Nemo said as we rolled into a sort of confined bay. "A month from now, the numerous fishing boats of the harvesters will gather, and these are the waters their divers will ransack so daringly—"

He had more to say about pearl fishing, but I cut him off. "Awesome. So where's my shark rifle at?"

"Rifle! What for? Don't your mountaineers attack bears, dagger in hand? And isn't steel surer than lead? Here's a sturdy blade. Slip it under your belt and let's be off."

A *shark knife*. Under the belt of my *diving suit*. Conseil and Ned accessorized with their knives as directed—and of course Ned had brought along a harpoon as well. *Now* I felt safe.

Well, whatever. Half the time when this book felt like it was leading up to something big, the payoff was just some bit of made-up science fiction nonsense, so probably the knives would shoot laser beams, and everything would work out fine. Once we were underwater, I was reminded of how easy it was to move in the diving rigs—plus, nobody could talk to me with my head encased in my helmet, which suited me just fine.

The sun had come up by then, and since we didn't go any deeper than 30 feet or so, there was plenty of light. We tromped around for a while looking at your standard majestic underwater bullshit, went right past a vast field of a billion shellfish (Ned stopped to cram as many as he could into a netted sack, of course). Then Nemo led us to a big, underwater cave, which we marched through for three solid minutes until it opened up into a larger chamber.

Inside was a gargantuan oyster that looked like something you would see on Barsoom (if Barsoom had oysters or, you know, *water*). Seriously, it was at least ten feet wide. The shell was already open a crack, and Nemo wedged his knife in it to keep it from closing while he separated some of the oyster's flesh with his arms.

Inside was a pearl the size of a coconut.

Apparently, he decided it wasn't done baking yet, because he left it right where it was, yanked his blade out and started marching back toward the open sea.

Was he just *showing off*? Was it some kind of test to see if one of us would try to steal his treasure once he turned his back? I kind of thought Ned might, but he just shrugged at me under his diving rig, and we all turned and followed Nemo back out of the cave.

We marched onward, and a short while later Nemo planted his feet and gestured for us to crouch next to him at the edge of a crevice. He pointed at a shadow up on the surface of the water—it was only maybe 15 feet deep here—and at first, I was sure it was a shark, because *why wouldn't it be*?

Turns out it was just a rowboat, though, and some half-naked guy soon dived from it holding a big-ass rock tied to a rope to help him sink as quickly as possible to the ocean floor. Once he was down there, he frantically gathered oysters into a sack for fifteen or twenty seconds, swam back up, hauled up his rock, and proceeded to repeat the entire process. It looked like grueling work, and if oyster season hadn't officially started yet, the pearls probably weren't even ripe yet. But this poor son of a bitch was obviously desperate enough to try to snatch what he could before the clamming fleets or whatever came and picked everything over.

We watched him dive for a few minutes—he was super good at his job, and it was actually kind of mesmerizing—and I realized that if Nemo was truly the only person in the world with scuba gear, his coconut pearl was definitely safe from being discovered. This guy could barely stay underwater for half a minute, which mostly ruled out cave exploration.

After his fifth or sixth dive, I had more or less seen what there was to see, but Nemo and the others still seemed enraptured. I was trying to decide if I should knock on Nemo's helmet to get his attention when suddenly, the diver kind of freaked out and let go of his sack.

A shadow fell over him. Yeah. *That* was when the shark showed up.

It was fucking *huge*, and I will tell you straight up that my first instinct was not to go for my belt knife. It was to GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE because encountering a shark in its native element is basically as terrifying as encountering a bloodthirsty tiger in the jungle if the tiger was twenty-five feet long and *also a helicopter*. The diver dodged out of the way just before the shark got its jaws around him, but got smacked with the thing's tail as it rocketed past. He floated lifelessly (or unconsciously, at the very least) as his assailant looped around for another strike.

Captain Nemo was having none of it. He leaped from his crouch toward the diver, knife in hand. The shark spotted him and corrected course to intercept this new threat. Nemo was ready for it, though, and dived out of the way at the last minute, plunging his knife into the fish's gut.

Its blood clouded the water as the shark thrashed about, but apparently, one slash wouldn't be enough to take down the beast. The view cleared enough to reveal Nemo clutching one of the shark's fins, desperately trying to keep away from its entire face area, and stabbing it repeatedly in an effort to nick something vital. (His knife, for the record, fired exactly zero laser beams.)

Then, with a mighty shudder, the shark dislodged Nemo, slamming him against the ocean floor. It flipped around and opened its jaws wider than I could have even imagined possible—

And tasted the harpoon of Ned Motherfucking Land, who jumped into the fray and shoved the thing right through the shark's open maw and directly into the tiny internal flesh-pouch that housed its brain.

In its death throes, the shark thrashed around enough that the turbulence knocked Conseil right off his feet. Ned pulled Nemo out of the way of the thrashing, but the Captain shrugged him off and rushed to the diver, quickly cutting through the rope that attached him to his rock, and swam him back to the surface.

Nemo had already gotten the man into his rowboat by the time we joined him, and he and Conseil kind of vigorously massaged him until he regained consciousness.

If you can imagine how freaked out this guy looked when he awoke to find four huge, copper craniums leaning over him, double it, and that's how the diver reacted when Nemo pulled a bag of pearls out of his diving suit pocket and placed it in his shaking hands. (Keep in mind that we hadn't *collected* any pearls while we were down there—these were pearls that Nemo was just carrying around).

Nemo tossed himself over the side of the boat, and since the diver couldn't hear anything we might say through our helmets anyway, I just gave him a friendly little wave and followed. We were back at the spot where our own boat was anchored in half an hour, and the crew helped us out of our diving suits.

Nemo's first words were for Ned. "Thank you, Mr. Land."

"Tit for tat, captain," Ned replied. "I owed it to you."

That was the entirety of their manly exchange, and we rowed off toward the submarine. There was a momentary panic when we spotted a dozen more sharks swimming our way, but they were just there to cannibalize the corpse of the one we killed already, so it was fine.

I wasn't quite ready to leave Nemo alone to bask in stoic masculinity, however.

"I thought you hated surface dwellers," I said. "You built a whole fancy submarine and swore off land forever just to get away from them."

"Indeed."

"And yet you just risked your life attacking a shark with pretty much your bare hands to rescue one."

"That Indian, Professor, lives in the land of the oppressed." His gaze turned toward the sea. "I am to this day, and will be until my last breath, a native of that same land."

Chapter XIII.

THE MEDITERRANEAN IN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS.

It was kind of utter horseshit. I mean, I'm sure he was sincere and all, but if he *really* wanted to help the poor, oppressed people of the world, he could spend his vast fortune and copious free time doing anything other than aimlessly wandering the ocean depths and getting into knife fights with sharks. Nemo was a complex dude, though. He was the brilliant innovator who sought out all the world's most cutting-edge technologies and combined them into something utopian and revolutionary. But he was also the wild-eyed psycho who just wanted to watch motherfuckers burn. The guy was basically a cross between Elon Musk and, I don't know, *Elon Musk*.

My mind, however, kept returning to the futhermucking Wizard's bashed-in head, and his cryptic *treasure-buried-at-urk* routine. The timing of his weird little conspiratorial head-gesture and his impending death *couldn't* be a coincidence. Had the Secret Book Masters taken him out because they found out he was trying to tip me off? Had *Nemo*? He had seemed pretty wrecked by the whole incident, but that could be guilt just as much as anything else. Was he working *with* the book people? Of course, it was also entirely possible Nemo, the book assholes, and the Wizard were all in on it together, and just messing with me to further whatever moronic purpose any of this was supposed to serve in the first place.

Ugh. Trying to figure out the behind-the-scenes crap in these things was even worse than the actual public domain literature bullshit itself. Which was saying A LOT.

After our whole shark/pearl/rescue-a-diver-and-then-try-to-terrify-him-back-to-death adventure, we headed into some section of ocean that Ned insisted was a big dead end, except for the secret underwater tunnel that led

us to some different section of ocean on the other side of Egypt or wherever. Nemo bragged at length about how he went about discovering it (basically by tagging fish in the two different oceans to prove his tunnel theory, and then looking for it really hard—if you can imagine that explanation taking roughly three hours to get through, then you'll have some idea how that day went). The actual tunnel part was neat, though—basically like the pirate ride at Disneyland only in complete darkness and with fewer songs about rape. Somewhere in there, we also sailed through some boiling underwater volcano thing, and Captain Nemo repaid Ned for saving his life by letting him murder a giant sea cow with his harpoon.

Ned's euphoria, however, was short-lived, and the following day he was grumbling about being held prisoner again. "If we truly have passed into the Mediterranean," he said—it had taken a solid hour to convince him that the secret tunnel was a real thing, and he still wasn't quite ready to concede the point—"then we're in Europe, and before Captain Nemo's whims take us deep into the polar seas, I say we should leave this *Nautilus*."

I was still torn on the whole idea of escaping. On the one hand, derailing the plot and just fucking right off might actually be my best play. But then, that damn Wizard had used his legit dying breath to tell me about some secret escape hatch. And on the *third* hand, for all I knew, this *was* the part of the book where we were supposed to escape, and if I didn't play along, I would never find the maelstrom.

Uuuuuuuuuugh. I decided that my best bet was just to offer the opinion I assumed Aronnax probably would have, and keep the whole thing rolling however it was going to roll. "Yeah, but what about all the *science shit*?" I said. "You can't tell me you aren't enjoying all this *sitting around and looking at fish*."

He paused and crossed his arms. "Honestly," he said, "I'm not sorry about this voyage under the seas. I'll be glad to have done it, but in order to have done it, it has to finish. That's my feeling."

"It will finish, Ned," Conseil said. "After all, it's extremely possible that after crossing every sea on the globe, Captain Nemo will bid the three of us a fond farewell."

"Bid us a fond farewell? You mean beat us to a fare-thee-well!"

Those two things actually sounded the same to me, but by his tone, I gathered that the second one probably involved more ass-kicking and death. And, having already seen the raging *Elon Musk* pop out from beneath the

surface of Nemo's eccentric-scientist-nutjob schtick, I had to concede the point. Conseil insisted that he would agree with whatever I said, so his vote didn't technically count and didn't make it two against one—which was A) the most Conseil thing to say ever, and B) a pretty weird definition of agreeing with me.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "You find us an honest-to-god escape opportunity, and I'm in. But it has to be a good one, because we only have one chance at this. You know as well as I do that if we try to escape this ship and fail, we're fucking *sea-shantied*." I gave him a grim stare. "And not in the *good* way."

That evening when we were zoned out staring at fish in the library room, Nemo joined us. Ned bailed immediately—he was probably worried he'd blurt out some vital piece of his elaborate and ever-changing escape plan—and Conseil followed him. Nemo, however, seemed content to sit in silence, which was okay by me—I tended to enjoy roughly the first ten minutes of any conversation with the big weirdo, and then start looking for ways to chew my own leg off.

We were floating a short distance beneath the waves, and, to my surprise, a human person swam right out from behind a school of flounders, stuck his face against the *Nautilus*'s thick window pane, and waved. This wasn't one of our crew. It was just some dude with no shirt and a big leather sack tied to his waist.

Nemo waved right back, and the guy gave him a thumbs-up and headed for the surface.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "That's Nicolas from Cape Matapan, nicknamed *Il Pesce*. He's well known throughout the Cyclades Islands. A bold diver! Water is his true element, and he lives in the sea more than on shore."

"Bitchin'," I said. Nemo completely ignored me, however, and went to a sort of cabinet/safe thing over by the window. Sitting next to it was a medium-sized pirate chest-thing with his logo on it.

Inside the cabinet was a *shit-ton* of gold bricks. He proceeded to load them into the chest until it was stacked to the lid, and four crewmen came to haul it away (for the record, they struggled to even lift it).

"Holy *balls*," I said. "Is Il Pesce a *contract killer*?" It *did* sound kind of like a goofy mafioso nickname, and even more so later when I found out it

literally translated into *The Fish*. For that much gold, though, you could probably hire a whole army of fish assassins. "Does he run an illegal gambling/gold-brick-smuggling riverboat? Ooh—what's it called?" If the illegal gambling/gold-brick-smuggling riverboat was called *Il Maelstromo*, this book was about to get a *lot* more interesting.

Nemo didn't even raise an eyebrow at my line of questioning. "With your permission, Sir, I'll bid you good evening."

Well, that was lame. The next day I met Conseil and Ned up on the roof for fresh air time, but the waves were so choppy, it was tough to even stand up top for very long. Ned looked even more agitated than usual and followed me back to my suite once we gave up on the whole thing.

"Dude, what?"

He shut the door, then paused for a moment, and locked it. "We'll do it this evening at nine o'clock," he said. "I've already alerted Conseil. By then, we'll be just a few miles off the coast of Spain, it'll be cloudy, and the wind's blowing toward shore. You gave me your promise, Professor Aronnax, and I'm counting on you."

He had already loaded oars, a sail, and some provisions into the rowboat, which he insisted he could float to the surface from the *Nautilus*'s usual cruising depth of just twenty or thirty feet.

I wasn't at all sure that I was ready to go. "Nine o'clock seems early—will Nemo even be in bed by then?"

"Nemo? We haven't seen hide nor hair of the old man in days, so I hardly felt the need to factor his whereabouts into our plans."

Days? How much time was I skipping every night? Also, was that son of a bitch off having adventures on the illegal gambling/gold-brick-smuggling riverboat *without me*?

"Fuck it. I'm in."

"Excellent. Conseil and I will go to the central companionway, and you will wait two steps away in the library for our signal. If circumstances are in our favor, between ten and eleven this evening, we'll be landing on some piece of solid ground. Or we'll be dead. I'll see you this evening!"

I had no idea if this was the part in the actual book where I was supposed to convince Ned to stay longer for the sake of fish science or whatever—it certainly didn't *feel* like the business I had with Captain Nemo was finished. Would the book even *let* us escape if we weren't supposed to? Back on Mars, some asinine nonsense always seemed to come up just when

I was about to get the hell out of dodge. Also, if I did manage to go off script, where would I even *go*? To America? To Paris? I apparently spoke French just fine.

Wait, what about *London*? This book probably took place in the same general time period as the Sherlock Holmes thing. If I showed up at his house (I knew the address by heart, since I heard the phrase "221B Baker Street" repeated like forty times during the eighteen hours I was even in that story), would Watson see me as Professor Aronnax? Or as *Sherlock Holmes*? Would he be all eye-twinkly and softly mustached, ready to find a dark room full of poisonous snakes to finish whatever it was we *totally almost started* when I was there the last time?

Shit, maybe I was ready to get off this fucking submarine already.

I mean, I had always assumed the Matrix, like, rebooted when I moved from one book to another, but it was entirely possible that I was just on some massive public domain planet or something, and every set was just in a different location. There was supposed to be a vast desert that completely surrounded Oz, for example—for all I knew, that was where the Barsoom set was, and I had literally just fallen out of the balloon into it. All these deep-sea adventures could be happening in an enclosed pond spruced up with special effects like that dumb submarine ride at Disneyland. (Which, now that I thought about it, was *probably* based on the stupid movie that was based on this stupid book.)

Bleargh. My actual problem was that I still had no idea where or what the maelstrom was. The Wizard had said there was an escape hatch there—and even though it was entirely possible that it was a setup, or even just some confused dying breath rambling, I was hanging a whole lot of significance on the word "escape." *Escape* implied that it wasn't just the usual tornado off to the next awful thing. *Escape* meant it was either getting me to the hidden lair of the Secret Book Masters or sending me home.

The truth was, my hopes of ever seeing my mom again, or Madeline, or the stupid Calabasas Mall had more or less died when I found myself puking up my guts on the *Abraham Lincoln*. I realized now that the kind of low-grade, emotionless daze I had wandered through the first chunk of this book in was one of the stages of grief for my real life. And sure, it was peppered with sharp pangs of sadness and longing for the two people in the entire world that I genuinely loved—like the one that was stabbing me right

at that moment—but I wasn't about to invite those feelings to hang around by hoping for the best.

No, the face I was focused on seeing again was that fucking sexy librarian woman who trapped me in the first place, and who *still owed me twenty bucks*. It was a face that HAD BETTER have some god damned answers, BT-dubs, if it didn't want to get punched.

Since I had the whole day to kill anyway, I figured I'd check with Conseil to make sure he was still up for whatever—Ned claimed to have talked to him already, but that guy was 90% full of shit most of the time, so who even knew? He wasn't in any of his usual spots (i.e., his cabin, my cabin, the library, or the roof), so I just kind of wandered around opening doors and stuff. Needless to say, it didn't take long before a half-dozen sailors in various states of undress came pouring out of one of them just as soon as I'd cracked it open.

They left the door open to reveal Conseil, casually and serenely buttoning his uniform.

"Is there anything Master requires?" he asked.

"I, uh... Oh. Hey," I said.

"Master must forgive me for abandoning him," he said—not with any hint of shame or fluster, just in his usual polite, detached Conseil tone. "Certainly Master has witnessed the crew's propensity for singing and dancing. It turns out that the average sailor would rather lead than follow, so if one prefers the *latter*, one might find that one's dance card is always quite full."

A hint of a smile caught the corner of his mouth. "I shall endeavor to keep my escapades confined to after-work hours," he said.

"Dude, endeavor to get as much dancing in as your little heart desires, all day and night," I insisted. "It's just... what about Ned?"

"Ned *Land*? Oh, dear. I must admit that I've grown much more fond of the old boy than I ever thought I would. But I can't imagine he'd make much of a *dancer*."

Huh. Well, fair enough. "Oh, did he mention the three of us escaping tonight, by the way? You can TOTALLY stay if you're, having fun here."

"And abandon Master? Pish-posh."

And that was it. I spent the rest of the day basically eating and dicking around. Ned was right—Nemo was nowhere to be found, and other than Conseil's dance troupe, the only other crewman I saw was the silent

replacement guy who had been bringing us our meals ever since the whole wizard brain fiasco. By 8:30, I was in the library, twitching with anticipation and trying to decide if I should just steal a bunch of shit, in case I needed to pawn it for train money or something. As I was attempting to wiggle the cabinet safe open, I noticed that the door to Nemo's bedroom was ajar.

His Elon Musk rage face flashed in my memory. I *knew* he'd be straight-up livid if he found out I'd been rummaging through his stuff. You know what, though? Fuck that guy. I was pretty much burning down whatever the weird, unspoken emotional bond was between us with the whole escape thing, so if I ever saw him again, he was going to be pissed anyway.

Also, if there was a maelstrom clue anywhere on the submarine, this was probably my last chance to find it.

I knocked on the open door just to make sure, but the cabin was empty. And not just of *people* either—I had forgotten how spartan that place was. There wasn't even a desk or a dresser to rummage through—his clothes were hung neatly in a closet, and other than a whole mess of nautical instruments and a few hanged portraits, even the walls were bare.

I hadn't really inspected the paintings any of the times I'd been in there—they included George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, though, which I guess made sense, considering that he was all into liberty and underdogs and stuff. It dawned on me, though, that this book was only taking place a few years after the end of the Civil War—if Nemo was an admirer of Lincoln, they very well could have *met*. For all I knew, Nemo could have been running chests full of gold bricks up the Potomac River to help the North fight to end slavery. It would have been on-brand.

But unless one of the frames on the wall was a photo of THE MAELSTROM with a helpful red arrow labeled ESCAPE HATCH HERE (and none of them was, I checked), there really wasn't anywhere in Nemo's cabin to *hide* any secret clues. Unless—

My eyes stopped on Nemo's bed, which was identical to my own. *Unless he was hiding his mysterious shit in the same place I was.* I hadn't given a stray thought to the package stored under my bed in weeks—in fact, it wasn't until that very moment that I realized I was about to make a run for the wilds of Spain *without even remembering to bring my hoodie.* I

dropped to my knees at the bedside and grabbed the blanket draped across the bed by one corner.

"Professor Aronnax," the cold, crisp, unmistakable voice of Captain Nemo said from the doorway behind me. "Just the man I've been scouring the ship for."

Chapter XIV.

A LOST CONTINENT.

At first, I thought it was my stomach that was sinking, and it took me a brief moment to realize that, no, it was the entire submarine. You totally got used to the feeling of constant motion in that thing, but you could still feel changes of direction in your gut, and we were now descending rapidly.

"It appears as though I'd have been better off remaining in my quarters and waiting for you to find *me*," Nemo said. "Tell me, Professor, do you know your Spanish history?"

"Uh... WUT?" I replied. As I did, I felt the ship settle to a halt on the ocean floor.

"Ah, even the most learned men still have much to learn. Come, join me, and I'll tell you about an unusual episode in this body of history." Nemo could be a hard guy to read, but if anything, he seemed *jovial*. Did he just assume I had come into his room looking for him and was checking under the bed to be *thorough*?

He stretched out on a couch in the library, and I took a seat nearby in the shadowiest corner of the room.

"Professor," Nemo said, "listen carefully. This piece of history concerns you in one definite respect, because it will answer a question you've been no doubt unable to resolve."

Had he found out about the escape? Was he about to lay down some weirdly polite, subtly coded death threats? Wait—what if he knows about everything? What if he's trying to pass me clues about the Secret Book Masters?

Okay, Arabella, you can do this. It's time to attempt something you have never before managed to accomplish in any conversation with Captain Nemo:

Actually pay attention.

Needless to say, I failed utterly at this task. Within two minutes, he had blunted all my attempts at concentration with the boring-ass cudgel of Spanish history. Apparently in 1700, England, Holland, and Austria had teamed up to try to steal the crown of Spain? Spain had no army, but was rich from plunder from the Americas, though. So I guess that was a thing.

This wasn't secret coded *anything*. This was just Nemo being Nemo. About forty-five minutes later, and only because he constantly paused to quiz me on what he had rambled about so far, I had learned that the Spanish sunk a ton of their own ships in the Bay of Vigo to prevent their enemies from hijacking the stolen treasure. Considering that the Incan Empire most of that booty came from was in Peru, where my *mom* was from, I didn't have a ton of sympathy for them.

Nemo stood and, with a grand gesture, threw the switch that uncovered the big submarine bay windows. Outside, bathed in electric light, dozens of crewmen in diving suits were busy clearing away half-rotten barrels and loading, gold, silver, and jewels by the armful into underwater wheelbarrows. Which pretty much explained the other day's pile of gold bricks.

Nemo seemed quite pleased with himself. "Did you know, Professor, that the sea contained such wealth?"

"And now you can finally steal it from the people who stole it from the whole civilizations that dropped dead from European diseases. Cool."

"Steal!" he said. "Sir, what makes you assume this wealth goes to waste when I'm the one amassing it?"

I don't know, *your ostentatious*, *posh-ass super submarine*? I had struck a nerve, though.

"Do you think I toil to gather this treasure out of *selfishness*?" he sputtered. "Who says I don't put it to good use? Do you think I'm unaware of the suffering beings and oppressed races living on this earth? Poor people to comfort? Victims to avenge? Don't you understand—"

His face balled up into a fist, and he stormed off without another word. Huh. Was it possible that Nemo was the *actual*, *real deal*?

One way or the other, the surprise flurry of late light shipwreck scavenging had thwarted Ned's escape plan. The next day, he was positively morose. I told him and Conseil everything Nemo had said (or the bullet points, at least), and Conseil mentioned that the island of Crete, right around where we had encountered Il Pesce and casually slipped him a

king's ransom, had been fighting a nasty, bloody rebellion against the Ottoman Empire when we left port a few months back.

And then I *really* felt like an asshole.

"It's not over yet," Ned insisted. "My first harpoon missed, that's all! We'll succeed next time—and as soon as this evening if I have my druthers."

He spent the rest of the day trying to assess the ship's position and bearings, only to determine that it had made an about-face and had been speeding steadily away from Europe since the previous night. On top of that, a storm was rolling in. Escape-wise, we were shit out of luck.

* * *

More eating, more staring at fish, more sleeping. Or, at least, more *trying* to sleep. Somewhere around 11:00 that night, I was staring at the ceiling in my room, deciding that if I had to be stuck forever in a stupid-ass book, at least I was in one that had a *genuinely comfortable bed that literally floated from plot point to plot point so I didn't have to goddamned walk everywhere*.

There was a knock at the door, and I froze (I mean, it wasn't like I had been moving around all that much, but now I was not moving *on purpose*). I waited for a moment, trying to decide if maybe someone was knocking on a *different* door nearby, or if it might just be some sort of miscellaneous submarine noise. But the knock came again.

Since my doors were locked, there was nothing to do but get out of bed and answer it, and in a moment, I cracked the door to discover Nemo, fully dressed in his fancy, pseudo-military captain's uniform, at my door.

"I apologize for such a late and unexpected visit," he said. "If you remain tired from last night's vigil, I will promptly bid you a good night."

"I'm fine," I said. I did not open the door any further than it already was.

"Then, Professor Aronnax, I propose an unusual excursion."

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"So far you've visited the ocean depths only by day and under sunlight. Would you like to see these depths on a dark night?"

"Uh, I guess?"

"I warn you, this will be an exhausting stroll. We'll need to walk long hours and scale a mountain. The roads aren't *terribly* well kept up."

Uuuuugh. Last time I saw Nemo, he had stormed off in a tizzy (I mean, I had technically accused him of, like, *war crimes*, so fair enough), and now he was inviting me on midnight strolls and cracking what I'm medium-sure was a bonafide Captain Nemo joke. I had long since decided that the weird vibes that intermittently came off this guy weren't *seducey* in nature, but whatever they were, they were coming in waves right then. Still, for all I knew, there was a *maelstrom* out there on the ocean floor, and I decided I couldn't afford to pass up the opportunity, just in case.

I followed him to the diving helmet room and realized that Ned and Conseil hadn't been invited on this particular trip. There wouldn't be any other crewmen joining us, either—Rando Johnson was on hand to help us into our gear, but he didn't suit up himself. Also, nobody had bothered to turn on the lights.

Oh, shit. Was this how I was going to die? The waiter wizard had met with a mysterious death *immediately* after a weird, inept attempt to communicate, and Nemo had acted CRAZY sketchy about it. Was this MY mysterious accident? Once my helmet was on, I felt Rando place something in my hand, and at first, I thought it was the magic electricity gun (because, duh, rifle duel underwater at midnight), but it turned out to be a walking stick.

The bottom fell out of the room, and in moments, Nemo and I had settled on the ocean floor.

It was much, *much* darker than when we usually went out (you know, night time and all) but once my eyes adjusted, I could see a reddish glow coming from the top of a steep hill, which shed enough light on the seascape to navigate by. Nemo started marching up the hill—so, toward an underwater volcanic eruption? I really had no other option than to follow.

We hadn't come equipped with our flashlights, or guns, or even a goddamned shark knife. And, of course, there was no talking through our helmets. Still, as we marched on, the serenity of the ocean floor started to seep into my bones, and my general chill returned. If Nemo wanted to kill me, he hardly needed an elaborate ploy to get the job done. (Unless maybe he was leading me away from *SECRET BOOK MASTER SUBMARINE SURVEILLANCE*. Uuuugh. Who even knew.)

The ocean floor grew alternately crunchy and slimy as we marched, and I have to admit I was grateful for my stick. After what was probably a couple of hours, we entered a forest of sorts. Not a forest of your typical underwater vegetation, mind you—these were in the shape of regular land-trees, but long since calcified, with a texture that looked like rock.

We crested a hill, and in the dim glow, I could see the remains of massive stone structures, with Greek columns and domed roofs and crumbled arches and the whole deal.

I spotted some dark shapes and occasional glowing eyes shifting around in the darkness, but Nemo had clearly traveled this way before, and the wildlife swimming around out there didn't seem to frighten him. We marched into the ruins on what I realized was the ancient, half-buried remains of a stone walkway (an actual road—and here I'd thought the old man had developed a sense of humor) and as soon as we came to the first ruin, Nemo picked up a bit of chalky stone and scrawled a single word onto a black rock jutting out from beneath the structure:

ATLANTIS

I caught a flash of goofy grin from inside his helmet, and all of a sudden, I had figured Nemo out.

He was pompous and self-important and enjoyed nothing as much as listening to himself talk, but he also genuinely wanted to be understood, and my approval was more important to him than even he wanted to admit. When it came to all the wonders of his magical submarine and the sea itself, his first urge was to share them with me. The point of this weird late-night stroll wasn't some kind of veiled threat, and it wasn't trying to get into my diving pants. It was that *one day, all of this will be yours*.

Captain Nemo thought of me as a son.

Granted, there were only maybe six or eight years separating him and Aronnax, but it's *possible* that I might not *always* react to shit the way a typical forty-year-old professor would. And I think the unexpected paternal vibes that our relationship had stirred up in Nemo were partly in response to having a fellow scientist on board to pontificate at, and partly a genuine connection with *the actual me*.

We walked on, with Nemo pausing occasionally to gesture expansively or point out some detail that I absolutely could not distinguish from anything else, but found myself oddly charmed nonetheless. By the time we made it back to the *Nautilus*, the first glimmers of dawn were sparkling on the waves above.

Chapter XV.

SPERM WHALES AND BALEEN WHALES.

That day I woke up at the crack of 4 p.m., and found Conseil in the library, staring out the window, transfixed. It actually was the same day, too, because it turned out that Atlantis was not just a lost city but an entire lost continent, and we were zooming by so close that it felt more like watching from a bullet train than a submarine. I made some dumb comment about the ruins, but Conseil, that magnificent nerd, was a hundred percent focused on *classifying fish*.

And that was Thursday. It would be nice to report that we were due for some compelling plot development, but the truth is, time started passing like crazy around that point, and I was pretty okay with it. We visited this secret underground lake in a long-dormant volcano that Nemo called his home port—I'm going to let it sink in for a moment that the dude LITERALLY HAD A HIDDEN VOLCANO BASE—and spent the day exploring (Ned stole honey from a beehive and threw rocks at birds, hoping to bag some lunch) and napping on the inner-volcano cave beach until the tide snuck up and drenched us awake.

At some indeterminately later date, we were cruising beneath the Sargasso Sea, which was a kind of giant lake area in the middle of the Atlantic where the currents swept all sorts of seaweed and logs and stuff from all over the world (I have absolutely no doubt that in our time, the whole thing is one massive island of discarded milk jugs). Apparently, the depth of the ocean in this region hadn't been properly charted by regular, non-made-up science by the 1860s, and Captain Nemo decided to give it a go.

We dove at a 45-degree angle for a really, *really* long time, and I found Nemo in his bedroom, examining all the various hunks of nautical

equipment that were mounted on the walls. The depth-ometer—or whatever it was called—was moving steadily. Six thousand, nine thousand, twelve thousand—by the time it hit sixteen thousand, we still hadn't hit bottom.

"Ha!" I blurted, triumphant. "Twenty thousand leagues, motherfuckers!" Nemo gave me an odd look. "That's sixteen thousand *meters*. Which you do understand is only *four* vertical leagues, yes?"

"What? No!"

"My dear professor, if we tallied up every single inch we've travailed upon the entire journey since you and your companions came aboard my ship, it would *perhaps* come to fourteen thousand leagues. Twenty thousand leagues, if you could somehow travel it straight down, would bring you—" he paused to do some quick math. "To the center of the Earth's core, back out the other side, and roughly one quarter of the distance to the moon."

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuundh. So more like *Twenty Thousand Leagues While Underwater, But Horizontally*. This book was so fucking dumb that even its *title* was dumb. For some reason, I felt short-changed. As I was sulking, though, something dawned on me.

If we had truly gone fourteen thousand leagues, I was almost three quarters of the way through this thing.

Regardless of whether the Wizard Waiter was *dead* dead or just off somewhere in the wild blue yonder, he was gone, and had more or less taken all of my secret spy paranoia bullshit with him. Either I was going to stumble across a maelstrom or I wasn't, and I guess I had more or less decided to cross (or burn) that bridge when I came to it. But if I couldn't find the escape hatch by the time we hit 20k, who knew what fresh hell I could wind up in next? As boring as this book was, at least it was *comfortable*.

Nemo had his crew drag out a big, old-timey camera rig to take a photograph of a bunch of rocks outside (we were so deep, the ship's walls were creaking from the pressure, and there was no plant or animal life to be seen whatsoever). I persuaded him to take a selfie with me in front of the window so at least there would be some people in the shot—I could barely lift the camera alone and had to have Rando Johnson work the flash and stuff, but I did coax Nemo into making the most absurd duck face ever, so that was hilarious.

On some other day (it was apparently March now?), Ned marched up the stairs to the roof before breakfast, looking like he had already worked himself into a pretty respectable tizzy. Conseil was trailing right behind him.

"To put a simple question to you, Sir," Ned asked, "how many men do you think are on board the *Nautilus*?"

He wanted me to calculate, like, the maximum possible number of human beings the ship could support based on how much oxygen they needed, but I wasn't in the mood to even pretend to do math.

"I don't know. Fifty?"

He groaned. "Fewer than my estimate, but still too many for three men." He looked like he was ready to pop a vein in his forehead, but beside him, Conseil just looked sad.

"Our poor Ned broods about all the things he can't have," he said. "He's obsessed by his old memories and it's breaking his heart. We must understand him—what does he have to occupy him here? Nothing. He isn't a scientist like Master, and he doesn't share our enthusiasm for the sea's wonders. He would risk anything just to enter a tavern in his own country."

I knew how he felt—I mean, substitute the Canadian bar for the Calabasas Hot Dog on a Stick, but you know what I mean. Then again, I got to skip entire weeks on this boring-ass pleasure ship. Ned and Conseil had to sit through the *entire four months*, or however the hell long it was by now. Ned slouched over the railing and sighed, only to perk up almost immediately at the sight of something out in the water that only he could see.

It was a whale. As it floated closer, I could kind of make out a tiny, dark blob rising and falling from the surface.

"If I were on board a whaler," Ned bemoaned, "there's an encounter that would be great fun! That's one big animal—look how high its blowholes are spouting all that air and steam. Damnation! Why am I chained to this hunk of sheet iron?"

He stamped his foot. "Look! It's coming toward us! It's thumbing its nose at me! It knows I can't do a blessed thing to it!"

Conseil, of course, wanted to classify it. "Surely a baleen," he said. "Order Cetacea, family Balaenidae. It's much too large to be a sperm whale or even a bowhead,"

"You talk about sperm whales," Ned said, "as if they were little beasts! But there are stories of *gigantic* sperm whales. And they're shrewd—I hear that some will cover themselves with algae and fucus plants, and people

mistake them for islets. They pitch camp on top, make themselves at home, light a fire—"

"Build houses," Conseil interjected.

"Yes, funny man," Ned said. "Then one fine day the animal dives and drags all its occupants down into the depths!"

Okay, that sounded super made up. Ned was on a tear, though—he went on to explain that in prehistoric times, before Jesus or whoever turned their tails sideways, whales could swim *much* faster than they do now.

Conseil was *delighted* by the conversation. "And do these animals live a long time?"

"A thousand years," Ned replied without hesitation. He looked back out toward the horizon. "Oh! It's not just one whale, it's ten, twenty, a whole gam! And I can't do a thing! I'm tied hand and foot!"

"But Ned, my friend," Conseil said, "why not ask Captain Nemo for permission to hunt—" Before he could finish his sentence, Ned scooted down the hatch and ran to look for the captain. A few moments later, he reappeared on the platform with Nemo in tow.

Ever since our aborted escape attempt, Ned had been avoiding Nemo—he never made eye contact if he could avoid it, and you could see his blood start to boil any time the two of them happened to occupy the same room. Even now, it was all he could manage to stare at the captain's feet.

"Captain Nemo, may I please hunt the baleen whales," he muttered, half under his breath.

"Hunt them? What for?" Nemo replied. "Simply to destroy them? We have no use for whale oil on this ship."

"But, Sir, in the Red Sea you authorized us to chase a dugong!" (Dugong, I guess, was the proper name of that sea cow thing.)

"There it was an issue of obtaining fresh meat for my crew. Here it would be killing for the sake of killing. I'm well aware that's a privilege reserved for mankind, but I don't allow such murderous pastimes. When your peers, Mr. Land, destroy decent, harmless creatures, they commit a reprehensible offense. Thus they've already depopulated all of Baffin Bay, and they'll wipe out a whole class of useful animals."

Ned was *piiiiiiiiiiissed*. Like, partially because he just flat-out wanted to kill a whale, but also because he was being lectured about the ethical ramifications of his favorite pastime *and* his livelihood. I was genuinely afraid he was going to throw a punch right there, but instead, he stuffed his

hands in his pockets, turned his back, and whistled what I'm pretty sure was "Yankee Doodle Dandy" through his teeth.

Meanwhile, Nemo was still staring out to sea. "In fact, the baleen whales have enough natural enemies without counting man. Professor Aronnax, can you see those blackish specks moving about eight miles to leeward?"

"Sure," I lied.

"Those are *sperm whales*. Dreadful animals that I've sometimes encountered in herds of 200 or 300. As for them, they're cruel, destructive beasts, and they deserve to be exterminated."

"Wait, what?"

Ned, however, was all over it. "Well, Captain," he said, "on behalf of the noble baleens, there's still time—"

"It's pointless to run any risks. The *Nautilus* will suffice to disperse these sperm whales. It's armed with a steel spur quite equal to your harpoon, I imagine. We'll show you a style of hunting with which you aren't yet familiar. We'll take no pity on these ferocious cetaceans. They're merely mouth and teeth!"

This was where I learned that the reason Nemo seemed less small-minded and petty than the average 1860s sea captain was that he was saving all his racism for *sperm whales*. Conseil, Ned, and I retreated to the library to watch through the windows, and, I mean, sure, the things were huge and aggressive and pretty scary to look at (they actually had teeth, too, unlike the larger baleens). But I don't know, *law of the jungle*? In the wild, some shit has to eat other shit?

We were almost thrown out of our chairs as the *Nautilus* shot off at top speed and hit the herd just as they were about to encounter the baleens. A big, bloody, whale mess smeared across the window, and I realized with a shock that it was *just the back half*. Nemo was in the steering bubble manning the wheel himself and spearing the things with so much force he was tearing them in half.

We jerked about, rose to the surface, dove back down, and impaled whales like crazy. There were *tons* of them, though—the massacre went on for *more than an hour*. At one point, a dozen sperm whales got together to ram us as a group, but we didn't even feel the impact. Even Ned, who couldn't keep himself from cheering when the carnage first began, seemed utterly morose by the time it was over.

Finally, the waves grew tranquil again, and I could feel the ship rising to the surface of the ocean. The hatch opened, and we rushed onto the platform.

The sea was covered with mutilated corpses and stained red as far as the eye could see. And the smell, I assure you, was not fucking great. A few terrified sperm whales were fleeing toward the horizon, and I half expected Nemo to chase them.

He joined us momentarily. "Well, Mr. Land?"

"Well, Sir," Ned said, "it's a dreadful sight for sure. But I'm a hunter, not a butcher, and this is plain butchery."

"It was a slaughter of destructive animals," the captain replied. "The *Nautilus* is no butcher knife."

"I prefer my harpoon."

Once again, I was convinced things were about to come to fisticuffs, but just then, we floated up to the massive body of a baleen whale who had been unable to escape its attackers, drifting on the surface with the waves lapping inside its open mouth. Still clamped onto its fin was an infant, maybe the size of a horse, who had been killed alongside it. And there was the thing. Nemo hadn't acted out of rage, or hatred. He saw these majestic beasts as the gentle, helpless masses, and the sperm whales as their oppressor. And he chose a fucking side.

I watched him shed a single, manly tear. And then immediately order his men to pump like two barrels full of whale milk from the dead animal's udders and roll them down into the ship.

Dude was a *complicated* son of a bitch.

Chapter XVI.

THE ICE BANK.

We continued south for days, mostly cruising on the ocean surface to avoid icebergs (Nemo would scan the surface of the water from the roof and occasionally run down to the steering wheel to pilot the boat around them). They got bigger and bigger until we were eventually cracking open whole sheets of ice with the ship's spike and pushing our way straight through them. Finally, we found ourselves pretty well stuck in one. You could actually see ice forming up around the submarine as you watched.

Nemo joined me on the platform. "Nice piloting, Cap'n," I said. "So, are we done here? Do we head back north now?"

"No, Sir," he said. "We will go to the pole."

Back home, Madeline had this big globe-pillow in her bedroom—because Madeline is a dork—which is where I learned that there was an entire continent at the south pole. Meaning you probably couldn't drive a *submarine* to it. Captain Nemo was damn well going to try, though. And who knows, this might be before any of that stuff was discovered, so in the universe of the book, I suppose anything was possible.

"Have you been there before?"

"No, Sir, but we'll discover it together. Where others have failed, we will succeed. Never before have I cruised so far into these southernmost seas, but as you know, I do whatever I like with my *Nautilus*. And I repeat: it will go farther still."

Sure as hell, he managed to dislodge the ship enough to get it sinking, and sailed right under the ice. It was almost two days before we surfaced again (we were well into the reserve oxygen tanks by that point), but when we did, it was in a patch of clear water between the ice sheets just offshore what turned out to be a fairly small, extremely manageable Antarctic continent.

Nemo, Conseil, a handful of crewmen, and I took the rowboat to shore to check it out, and Nemo made a big deal out of being the very first human being to set foot there, which meant it was okay for him to renege on his whole thing about never stepping on solid land. Ned, who had insisted that we would die before getting anywhere near the pole, stayed in his cabin to pout, which was probably for the best, considering that there were approximately a billion seals and walruses on that beach, and I'm confident he would have tried to murder as many as he could get his harpoon into.

(Nemo had apparently decided that they were not *villainous* walruses, so for now, bloodshed was averted.)

We needed to actually see the sun at high noon to perform the measurements necessary to chart our exact position, but the sky was overcast, meaning we couldn't figure out where the actual, technical south pole even was. Finally, on the third day of freezing-ass Antarctic beach relaxing—the *very last day* before the changing seasons meant we wouldn't even have enough sunlight to calculate—the skies were clear.

Nemo and I had marched to his best estimate of where the pole was—it wasn't even that far from where our boat was parked—and when noon rolled around, he verified his hunch.

"The South Pole!" he said in a solemn voice, handing me the telescope, which I guess I was supposed to know what to do with. I looked through it and nodded obligingly. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and rattled off the names of all the explorers—like, *so many explorers*—who had failed in their quests, and the *exact longitude* at which each of them had given up.

"Now, in 1868, on this twenty-first day of March, I myself, Captain Nemo, have reached the South Pole at 90 degrees, and I hereby claim this entire part of the globe, equal to one-sixth of the known continents." He unfurled a black flag with a gold N on it, which was possibly the most adorable thing I have ever seen in my entire life, and stuck it into the ground.

"Farewell, O sun!" he yelled at the sky. "Disappear, O radiant orb! Retire beneath this open sea, and let six months of night spread their shadows over my new domains!"

It was a pretty goddamned triumphant moment, to be honest. Of course, it turned out that the trip back under the ice wasn't going to as easy as the way in. I mean, unless you like completely running out of oxygen and asphyxiating painfully, in which case it was FUCKING GREAT.

We sailed northward, and sometime around 3 a.m. in the dead of night, I was woken abruptly by a crash that knocked my ass right out of bed. The floor was at a steep angle, so I groaned hard and made my way out into the crooked hallway. The lights were on in the library, where furniture and books and shit were piled up all over the place. Ned and Conseil appeared momentarily.

"What the hell was *that*?" I asked.

"I came to ask Master that very question," Conseil said. "Worded perhaps not *quite* so bluntly."

We set out to find Nemo, but I guess he was kind of busy—various crewmen were rushing back and forth and muttering to each other in Submarinish, ignoring us entirely. Eventually, we just returned to the library to wait for someone to explain what the hell was going on, and Nemo finally showed his face after about twenty minutes.

"What's up?" I said. "Another one of those incidents?"

"No, Sir. This time an accident."

Holy *balls*—if Nemo was actually admitting he might have made a mistake, shit *must* be dire.

"No errors were committed in our maneuvers, mind you," he continued (okay, *there* you go). "An enormous block of ice, an entire mountain, has toppled over. When an iceberg is eroded at the base by warmer waters, its center of gravity rises. Then it somersaults—turns completely upside down. Just such an event occurred as we were passing under the iceberg in question."

The ice beneath us was still shifting, and after about another half hour we managed to right ourselves but were now in a narrow channel of water between it and the solid ice bank above. We raced to one end of it and then the other, looking for an escape route, and Conseil and Ned absolutely freaked out over the sheer, blinding beauty of the shimmering ice crystals as we zoomed by.

"When we return to shore," Conseil said, "jaded from all these natural wonders, think of how we'll look down on those puny, pitiful works of man. The civilized world won't be good enough for us!"

Ned was no less in awe of the sight, but his tone was quite a bit more somber. "Do not worry, Conseil, my friend. We're never going back to that

world."

And, in fact, there was no exit to be found at either end of the tunnel. We were boxed in. When Nemo returned, he crossed his arms and spoke slowly and calmly.

"Gentlemen, there are two ways of dying under the conditions in which we are placed: death by crushing, and death by asphyxiation. I don't mention death by starvation, because the *Nautilus*'s provisions will certainly last longer than we will. Therefore, let's concentrate on the first two."

"Yes," I said. "Let's."

"We've already been beneath the waters for thirty-six hours, and in another forty-eight, our emergency reserve tanks will be used up."

The plan was to figure out which ice wall was the thinnest, then head out in diving suits and pound through that shit with pickaxes. It sounded like an *amazing* fucking plan.

"Sir," Ned said. "This is no time to bore you with my complaints. But I'm as handy with a pick as a harpoon, and if I can do anything for the common good, you may use me any way you want."

He joined a dozen crewmen out in the frozen tunnel, where they determined that the ice sheet directly below us was our best bet, and started digging. After two hours, they were swapped out by the second batch of volunteers, Conseil and me included. Which meant that I was *basically* every bit as noble under dire circumstances as that big Canadian bastard, except for the fact that I *definitely* bored some motherfuckers with my complaints.

The entirely of underwater physics must have been speculation in 1868, because I was able to swing my pick exactly as if I had been on dry land, which didn't seem like it could possibly be right. It was weird, but I suppose it was a lot better than the alternative. After two grueling hours, I returned to the ship, and man, you could *really* taste the difference between the fresh oxygen in the diving tanks and the stale air inside.

After twelve hours of combined work, we managed to dig a submarinesized hole roughly three feet deep. The ice sheet was *thirty* feet.

This was not going to end well.

The next day Nemo discovered a *third* exciting way to die when he realized that the channel was freezing closed around us from above, at a rate that would seal us in before we could finish our excavation. He had

boiling water from the ship pumped out, though, and managed to keep the temperature around us *just* above freezing. So, you know. Back to digging.

That evening we refilled all the scuba tanks with our oxygen reserves and then emptied as much as we dared into the ship. We had no choice—we'd be dead before morning if we didn't add some oxygen to the mix.

Two more days passed like this, and you'll be thrilled to know that I didn't get to skip through a single minute of it. By that night, the tanks were dry, and sleep was impossible. My lungs were inflamed, and my jaw hurt from *yawning* so hard. My head was pounding, and whenever I sat up in a desperate, fruitless attempt to catch my breath, I got dizzy. Dude, I had *literally died of asphyxiation* in the last book, and it hadn't been nearly this bad—apparently, unlike the last guy, this author had actually bothered to look up what happened to the human body when it ran out of oxygen. So fuck him for *that*.

The following morning, Conseil and Ned and I lined up for our turns digging (a little arm and back pain was *well* worth the trade for a breath of clean air). My companions both looked at least as rough as I felt.

"Oh, if only I didn't have to breathe," Conseil moaned, "to leave more air for Master!"

When the digging crew was called in, however, they were not replaced. Their diving tanks were as empty as well. We still had a good six feet to dig through, and Nemo was going to try to ram it. I mean, at that point, what the hell. If the *Nautilus* cracked open and freezing water rushed in, it wouldn't kill us all that much faster.

It turned out the attempt wasn't going to be nearly as dramatic as that, however. We only had enough room left in the tunnel to shift over to the hole and set the *Nautilus* down on it, then take as much water into the ballast tanks as we could to make the ship heavy. There was a low, creaking sound for in interminable few minutes, then a weird, thunderous crack that sounded like paper tearing.

And suddenly we were dropping like a cannonball. We were free!

Free *under the ice bank*, though—we still had to travel hours, possibly as much as a day, before we could get to the surface. And speaking for myself, there was no way in hell I was making it that long.

We retreated to the library and lounged on the furniture there, waiting. Ned and Conseil had purple faces and blue lips, and I don't imagine I looked any better. At some point, I lost vision, and then realized I couldn't

move any part of my body whatsoever. My *lungs* didn't go numb, though, so at least I still had indescribable pain *there*. I had no way to know how many hours passed this way, but at some point, my entire body started to shudder.

Pretty sure those were death throes.

Suddenly a whiff of air hit my lungs, and I regained consciousness. We had done it! We had made it through the ice to the—

No. As my vision cleared, I saw Ned and Conseil bending over me, holding a scuba tank with a few breaths of oxygen left in it, pressing the mouthpiece against my lips. Based on their coloring, it didn't look like they had partaken of any themselves—I tried to push their hands away before I had depleted the supply but didn't have the strength.

The reprise was brief, and my vision faded once again in just a few moments. They had managed to save my life, though, long enough for Captain Nemo to find a spot in the ice above him thin enough to crash into at forty miles per hour, breaking through to the surface with a magnificent crash.

The hatches were thrown open, and freezing, glorious oxygen flooded the ship.

Chapter XVII.

THE DEVILFISH.

I'm not sure how I even got to the roof platform—it's entirely possible I was carried by Ned Land—but me and my two pals spent the next hour up there just basking in the freezing weather and breathing our asses off. Nemo didn't join us in our revelry, and neither did anyone in the crew. Apparently, they were chill downstairs.

"Guys," I said after a while had passed, and my lungs felt up for conversation. "Uh... thanks." I have no idea if I was actually dying, but it sure as shit *felt* like I was dying, and even now, it's hard to explain how grateful I was to those two for what they did. "Just... seriously, thanks."

"Good lord, Professor," Ned said. "Don't mention it! What did we do that's so praiseworthy? Not a thing."

"For real, though, I owe you."

"Which I'll take advantage of," he said. "You can repay your debt by coming with me when I leave this infernal *Nautilus*."

To be honest, I wasn't sure *how* I felt about leaving at that point. "Anybody know where we're headed next?" We were still surrounded by ice floes, but cracking through them above the surface at a pretty reasonable pace.

"None," Ned said. "For all I know, our captain wants to tackle the North Pole, then go back to the Pacific by the notorious Northwest Passage."

"I wouldn't double dare him," Conseil replied. "In any event, he's a superman, that Captain Nemo, and we'll never regret having known him."

"Especially once we've *left* him," Ned insisted.

Days passed, and the long, slow drudgery of eating delicately prepared seafood feasts and pretending to care about ocean life continued, almost as if we hadn't just shared a blindingly painful near-death experience. Nemo made himself particularly scarce. Was he guilty about almost getting his

entire crew, and his forty-year-old professor son, killed? I don't know. Maybe he just had his own stuff going on.

We wound up heading up the Atlantic Ocean side of South America, but never slow enough or close enough to land for Ned to take a second shot at escaping. At one point, Conseil got himself knocked on his ass by an electric manta ray thing that was dragged up in the nets—he was so distraught that he actually called out to me for help *directly* rather than referring to me in the third person. Then he got his revenge by cooking and eating it, which was mildly hilarious.

I was loitering on the roof one morning (the climate was significantly warmer now), in a weird mood—Conseil had mentioned the date at breakfast, and it was April 15th, which happened to be the same day I had wandered into that god-forsaken mall shop and started this whole, entire journey through literature—or insanity, or actual literal hell, or whatever the fuck it even was—to begin with. I knew the exact day (the exact *time of day*, for that matter), because I had checked my phone about ten thousand times in the four minutes since Madeline was scheduled to meet with Amber Maldonado, assuming that entire thing was going to go down in flames fast. And besides that, April 15th was exactly four months before—

My birthday. *Shit*. I had spent, what, maybe two or three weeks in Oz? Then definitely AT LEAST three months on Mars. Potentially *much* more—a lot of that time was chained up in dark pits and stuff. And even with all the fast forwarding, I had passed at least two months worth of actual days trapped inside this boat.

Somewhere in there, if you counted the days I had actually had to sit through, *I had turned sixteen*.

Madeline and I were supposed to go get our driver's licenses together the weekend after my birthday since hers was less than a month before mine. But I just disappeared. Had she... gone without me? Or not gone? Out of mourning? As much as I missed her, the thought of how much she was missing me—how much my mom was missing me... I mean, they had to assume I was dead by now.

Fuck, even *I* was slowly beginning to assume I was dead.

At some point, Mustache First Officer Guy came up to scan the horizon like he always did and startled the crap out of me by shouting his usual phrase (the normal phrase, not the uh-oh-lock-up-and-drug-the-passengers one).

I turned around and stared at him. "Hey," I said.

He ignored me.

"Come on, just talk to me—I know like a million languages. Try saying anything in any language that isn't made-up submarine talk, and I bet I can understand it."

He gave me the briefest glance, then turned and took a step toward the stairs.

"Just tell me your name!" I said. I don't know why it was so important to me all of a sudden, but think I wanted someone to acknowledge that I was an actual, living human being. "If you don't tell me your name, I'm going to keep calling you Mustache First Officer Guy."

He stopped with his back still turned to me and pulled something out of his coat which turned out to be a small, four-inch scrap of paper (doubtlessly made from compressed whalebone or some bullshit) and a tiny pencil. After scribbling for a moment, he turned and held the note in front of my face.

I'M NOT ALLOWED TO

Then, honest to fucking god, he crumpled the note up and tossed it in his mouth, chewing and swallowing as he tromped down the stairs.

Huh.

Later in the library (staring out the window down there was the primary thing I did every day other than eating, sleeping, and taking dumps), Ned and Conseil were casually arguing about squid, but my mind was on other things.

"Hey, have either one of you ever had a conversation with anyone in the crew?"

Ned stopped mid-sentence and turned to face me. "What are you insinuating, Mr. Professor?"

Conseil was just behind Ned, and shot me a wide-eyed, panicky head-shake. "That would depend upon what Master defines as *conversation*..." he started.

"Jesus, is there anything on boats that *isn't* a euphemism for gay sex? Have you ever said words to a submarine person, and had that person acknowledge your words, and say words back to you?"

"Never," Ned said without hesitating.

"I..." Conseil gave it a moment's thought. "I can't say that I actually have. I know they speak both French and English, however, or are at least capable of singing it."

I had no idea if he had slipped back into sex-euphemism, but I let it go. The main point was whether Nemo's crew were forbidden from talking to all prison/passengers, or if it was a special rule for me. And the *burning* question, of course, was whether it was Nemo's rule at all, or *someone else*'s.

Conseil seemed eager to leave the subject. "Perhaps Master can settle our disagreement for us," he said. "I had mentioned that I'd like to come face to face with one of those devilfish I've heard so much about, which can drag ships down into the depths. Those beasts go by the name of *krake*—"

Ned interrupted him. "Fake-n is more like it."

"Krakens!" Conseil shot back.

Ned groaned. "Nobody will ever make me believe that such animals exist,"

"Why not?" Conseil replied. "We sincerely believed in Master's narwhal."

Ned just waved his hands frantically at our current surroundings.

"Why, I myself recall perfectly seeing a large boat dragged under the waves by the arms of a cephalopod."

"You saw that?

"Yes, Ned."

"With your own two eyes?"

"With my own two eyes."

Where, may I ask?"

"In Saint-Malo," Conseil replied. "In a *church*. It had a picture that portrayed the devilfish in question."

Ned let out a burst of genuine laughter. "Ha! Mr. Conseil nearly put one over on me!"

"Master will back up my claim," Conseil said. "Why, in 1861, to the northeast of Tenerife and fairly near the latitude where we are right now, the crew of the gunboat *Alecto* spotted just such a monstrous squid swimming in their waters."

He turned to stare out the window. "Does Master not recall that they called it *Bouguer's Squid*?"

I wasn't sure if he was screwing with Ned or genuinely trying to get me to remember some specific boat thing. I glanced at Ned, though, who by this point had a vein popping out of his forehead.

Fuck it. "Of course. Bouguer's Squid is exactly what they called it."

"And didn't it measure about six meters?" Conseil asked.

"Oh, at least."

"Wasn't its head," he continued, "crowned by eight tentacles that quivered in the water like a nest of snakes?"

"They were snakey as balls."

Ned sulked, but Conseil was still going. "Weren't its eyes prominently placed and considerably enlarged? And wasn't its mouth a real parrot's beak but of fearsome size?"

"Sure," I said. I was actually starting to get bored with the whole bit, though.

"Well, with all due respect to Master," Conseil replied serenely, "if this isn't Bouguer's Squid, it's at least one of his close relatives."

He stepped aside, giving us a view of a massive, horrifying creature that must have been fifty feet long at least, with tentacles that stretched another hundred. It was swimming backward and pacing us, staring directly through the window with one enormous eye. Whenever it spread its tentacles wide to push itself through the water, you could see the terrifying, half-open beak at the center of its face—I'm pretty sure its tongue had *teeth* on it.

Ned got over his sarcastic streak quick. "If that's not the very beast," he said, "one of *those* may be."

Several more of the things had appeared alongside it, and I checked the window on the other side of the room to discover at least six more in addition. Something scraped against the *Nautilus*'s hull hard, and I had to imagine that it was *beak*. Suddenly the whole ship jerked, and we slowed down considerably.

Just then Captain Nemo entered the room, followed by Mustache First Officer Guy. Nemo went straight to the window, stared into the eye of the nearest squid like it killed his mother, and barked an order in Submarinish to his first officer, who ran off to seal the windows up tight.

I hadn't had an actual conversation with Nemo since the whole asphyxiation thing. "So..." I said. "Those things are kind of fucked up, huh?"

"Correct, Mr. Naturalist," Nemo said. "And we're going to fight them at close quarters."

"At... *close* quarters?" Conseil asked.

"Our propeller is jammed, and I think the horn-covered mandibles of one of these squid are entangled in the blades."

"And what is your plan?" Ned asked.

"To rise to the surface and slaughter the vermin. Our electric bullets are ineffective against such soft flesh, where they don't meet enough resistance to go off. But we'll attack the beasts with axes."

"And harpoons, Sir," Ned said. "If you don't turn down my help."

"I accept it, Mr. Land."

I guess we didn't need our propeller to rise to the water's surface, because soon we were standing under the main hatch alongside Nemo, Rando Johnson, Mustache First Officer Guy, and eight other crewmen I didn't even have whimsical nicknames for. Ned, of course, was practically salivating at the opportunity to harpoon something.

I turned to Conseil. "Are we doing this?"

"As Master wishes," he said, picking up an axe. And as dedicated as Conseil was to me, I realized that I might not be the only one he wanted to keep safe from the devilfish.

We positioned ourselves on the stairway, and as soon as the main hatch was cracked a single inch, it flew open, pulled half off its hinge. A tentacle shot through the opening and Nemo chopped right through it with a sweep of his axe. It fell to the steps, wriggling, and two more tentacles burst through the gap and snatched up Mustache First Officer Guy, yanking him right out of the ship.

We charged, and found Mustachio swinging through the air at the mercy of an enormous squid-arm. Based on the sheer mass of tentacles out there, there were at least six of the things clamped to the hull of the ship around us (or ten, maybe? Basically it was a fuck ton of giant squid tentacles). Nemo started chopping through the squid parts closest to his first officer, and Conseil and I followed suit. Ned rushed directly to the edge of the platform and started plunging his harpoon into the water where he estimated that the creature's core was.

We managed to hack off at *least* ten nearby limbs—some of them must have belonged to a second squid, I guess?—and for a moment I genuinely thought we were going to save him. But then the tentacle holding the First

Officer aloft shuddered, and the monster attached to it reared its massive, very ugly head.

"Help! Help!" Mustache Guy yelled—it was probably French, but I heard it in English, and the desperation in his voice rocked me to my core. I leaped toward him with my axe raised over my head, but Nemo shoved me out of the way and took my place.

Before he had the opportunity to swing his own weapon, a spout of black liquid shot out from some hidden hole on the squid and blinded me. By the time I had managed to wipe enough if the disgusting goo from my eyes to see straight, the thing was gone, having pulled Mustache First Officer Guy down into the depths with it.

At least two more squid things emerged to take its place, and I screamed and started hacking off limbs like a girl possessed. *He had spoken to me*. And earlier in the day, he had ventured the barest, *slightest* bit of communication, *just like the Wizard had before his sudden*, *violent death*. Did he just die *as punishment for talking to me*?

And had Nemo pushed me out of the way to protect me, or to keep me from saving him?

I have no idea how long the rest of the battle took, but I did the entire thing screaming at the top of my lungs. I caught a glimpse of Conseil's face for a brief moment, and even as he did his level best to match my vigor, he looked *terrified* for me. At some point, Ned almost got himself bit in half, but Nemo did manage to save him, at least.

Finally, the last of the tentacles disappeared beneath the red waves, and Nemo dropped to his knees at the edge of the platform and wept openly into the sea.

I didn't know whether to kneel down to join him or push him over the edge.

Chapter XVIII.

IN LATITUDE 47° 24' AND LONGITUDE 17° 28'.

Either way, I was out. It didn't even matter if Nemo was in on the whole setup from day one, some hapless robot living the life H. G. Verne Orson Whoeverthefuck wrote for him a million years ago, or anything in between. And I didn't give a damn if I was better off following the script or trashing it, or even figuring out what the goddamn script was supposed to be. Or if that motherfucking mythical maelstrom hatch led to a secret villain's dungeon lair, or to the next shitty novel, or back home to—

Who was I kidding? I was *long* past imagining that anything I would ever do in one of these godforsaken things would bring me home.

From there, we sailed directly into a storm, and Nemo insisted on riding it out on the surface instead of diving safely beneath the waves. The entire ship rocked back and forth and end-to-end, and Nemo strapped himself to the roof platform in order to, I don't know—punish himself? Or prove he was better than weather, or properly mourn Mustache Guy?

Whatever he was doing, that dude had pretty much lost it.

The next morning turned out to be in June, which was fine by me—my rage was simmering along at a low boil, and I'm certain I had enough reserves in the tank that I'd still be seething if I had to sit through every single day of the interim. As I was waiting for room service, I pulled the carefully wrapped package from under my bunk, tore off the paper, and laid my clothes out on the bed—jeans, underwear, t-shirt, socks, sneakers, and my beloved black hoodie, all looking exactly like they had when I had gotten dressed that morning a thousand years ago to go meet Madeline at the Calabasas Mall.

If there was anybody on this submarine who could tell the difference between what I was actually wearing and what my character in the book was supposed to wear, they were about to see my freak flag fly.

Then, after my meal had arrived, I tucked some breakfast flounder under my arm and stepped through the door of my room to find Captain Nemo in the library, his back turned to me, staring out the window. I had been planning to track down Conseil and Ned and talk escape, but to hell with it. I could just as easily do this now.

"It's right here!" he said, his back still turned, and way too excited for that early in the morning. Past him, outside the window, I saw that we were resting on the ocean floor, a few hundred yards from some vaguely boatshaped mound that must have sunk decades ago, based on the sheer mass of ocean bullshit covering it.

"Originally this ship was christened the *Marseillais*," Nemo said, slowly and carefully. "It carried seventy-four cannons and was launched in 17—"

"Dude, I don't care about the fucking shipwreck."

He turned to me at last, and I could finally see his expression. It was *awe*. Whatever this stupid wreck was, he was geeking out over it.

"During the revolution, the new Republic of France changed its name, and seventy-four years ago to the day, this ship sank after a heroic battle—it preferred to go to the bottom with its 356 seamen rather than surrender. And with its flag nailed up on the afterdeck, it disappeared beneath the waves to shouts of 'Long live the Republic!'"

He looked like he expected me to share his enthusiasm, and I remembered that I was supposed to be French.

"Sir!" he said after I failed to reply. "This is the *Avenger!*"

I waited for him to finish, but he just gazed at me in anticipation, so I guess he was done. And if he had noticed at all that I wasn't in my regulation submarine uniform, it certainly didn't show in his expression.

"Cool," I said after a moment that stretched on weirdly long. "So what's the fucking deal—am trapped in this god-damned thing forever, or what?"

His face fell. "Professor Aronnax, I'll answer you today just as I did seven months ago: whomever boards the *Nautilus* must never leave it."

"I'm not talking about the ship. I'm talking about this *world*. Do you understand me? Do you get what I'm saying? I'm talking about this *whole fucking life*."

"I am not the man who brought you into this life," he sneered, "no matter how you may think of me. And if you tire of it, you've already seen the manner in which two men have left this ship."

"So we can be your slaves here, or we can die. Awesome."

"Call it anything you like."

"You know what? Fuck you. Ned's been chewing through his leg to get out of here anyway—"

"Ned Land can think, attempt, or endeavor anything he wants!" He looked straight-up pissed now. "What difference is it to me? I didn't go looking for him! I don't keep him on board for my pleasure! As for you, Professor Aronnax, you're a man able to understand anything, even silence. I have nothing more to say to you. Let this first time you've come to discuss this subject also be the last, because a second time I won't even listen."

I stormed off and found Conseil and Ned enjoying the tail end of a leisurely breakfast in their cabin.

"I'm done," I said. "Let's get the hell off this boat."

"Yes!" Ned said. "We'll go as soon as tonight, under cover of darkness, if the weather permits."

"Screw the weather—it could be motherfucking Christmas again by tomorrow. We leave tonight regardless."

"As Master wishes," Conseil said. We made for the roof platform to check the skies, and they didn't look great. The atmosphere was turning white and milky, the clouds were moving fast, and waves in the distance were dark and towering. Ned insisted that these were all signs of a hurricane on the way.

"Yeah," I said, "that sounds about—" Before I could finish my sentence, a sort of hollow, explodey sound came from somewhere in the distance. "Wait, what was that?"

"A cannon going off!" Ned said. I stared in the general direction of the noise and could make out a small, dark splotch about six or eight miles out.

"Let me guess," I said. "The Guardian of the Galaxy?"

Ned squinted at the horizon with his harpooner super-vision. "I can't make out what nation it's from—it's flying no flag. But I'll swear it's a warship because there's a long pennant streaming from the peak of its mainmast."

It was headed toward us, and within moments the blob had doubled in size.

"Sir," Ned said, "if that boat gets within a mile of us, I'm jumping overboard, and I suggest you follow suit."

"Master may recall," Conseil said, "that we have some experience with swimming. He can rely on me to tow him to that vessel if he's agreeable to going with our friend Ned."

I was extremely fucking agreeable to going with our friend Ned, but before I could say as much, a huge splash came from the water just behind the ship, and another exploding sound quickly followed

"They're firing at us!" Conseil exclaimed.

"Good lads," the Canadian muttered.

"With all due respect to Master—gracious!" Interrupted, Conseil shook off the water that had sprayed over him from another shell. "With all due respect to Master, they've discovered the narwhal and they're cannonading the same."

"They must have telescopes!" I said. "They can't see three people *riding* on it?"

"Of course they can see us," Ned said, staring hard at me. "That's why they're firing."

Back when we had first run across the *Nautilus* on the good ship *Abraham Lincoln*, all its bombs and harpoons and stuff had bounced right off. Even if submarines didn't actually exist yet in this century, it would have been pretty obvious to anyone onboard (except for *me* at the time, but whatever, fuck you) that they were dealing with an underwater warship. So they upped their game and sent bigger boats. This wasn't just some random ship encounter.

This was a Nemo hunter.

"We've got to do everything we can to get out of this jam!" Ned said. "Let's signal them! Damnation—maybe they'll realize we're decent people!"

He yanked a handkerchief out of his pocket to wave in the air. But he had barely unfolded it when he was struck by a massive blow from behind and collapsed onto the deck.

Nemo stood behind him, and he had *flipped his god-damned shit*. Veins were popped all over his neck and forehead, but his face was pale rather than red as if his heart had stopped bothering to pump blood into it. His eyes were dilated. Dude was Musk-ing *hard*.

"Scum!" he bellowed. "Do you want to be nailed to the *Nautilus*'s spur before it charges that ship?"

I thought for sure Ned was going to tackle him, but for all his toxic-masculine bravado, he was, at the end of the day, sane. He took one quick glance into the face of madness and instantly decided he wanted no part of it.

The face in question turned to the sea. "O ship of an accursed nation, you know who I am!" he shouted. "And I don't need your colors to recognize you! Look! I'll show you mine!" And at the edge of the platform, some crewman unfurled a black flag with a big, gold N on it, like the one Nemo had planted at the South Pole.

Just then a shell hit the *Nautilus's* hull square-on, failed to breach it, ricocheted quite close to us, and vanished into the sea.

Nemo shrugged and turned to me. "You and your companions, go below!"

"Just avoid it!" I said. "They can't catch you if you dive—just bail! Run away!"

He gave me a look that was still full-on crazy-eyed but veering toward contempt. "You're ill-advised to pass judgment on me, Sir. Fate has shown you what you weren't meant to see. The attack has come. Our reply will be dreadful. Get back inside!"

There wasn't much we could do but obey—a good fifteen crewmen had joined us on the roof, and they mostly looked as bloodthirsty as their captain. As I descended the stairs, I could hear him, still yelling into the sky.

"Shoot, you demented vessel! Shower your futile shells! You won't escape the *Nautilus*'s spur! But this isn't the place where you'll perish! I don't want your wreckage mingling with that of the *Avenger*!"

Chapter XIX.

A MASS EXECUTION.

We retreated to my bedroom and picked at the remains of my breakfast, which would usually have been cleared by then, but I imagine Replacement Waiter Guy had more important stuff to do. Conseil was as distraught as I'd ever seen him.

"What... from what *country* is that ship? I won't be a party to—"

Ned spat on the floor. "You won't be party to *anything*. We three are prisoners aboard this vessel. Nothing she nor her commander does, my friend, bears on my conscience, nor should it on yours."

"It does if there's a way we can stop it," I said. "And we don't at least *try*." These weren't giant monster squid Nemo was about to slaughter, or even angry, shitty whales viciously preying on slightly calmer, marginally less shitty ones. And I had no idea if this was supposed to be the part of the story where Professor Aronnax saved a boatload of marines from murder at the hands of Submarine Psycho, but if I had anything to say about it, it damn well would be.

The good news was, we sailed around randomly for the next several hours, popping out of the water periodically so the warship could give chase. Nemo was playing cat and mouse with the thing, just like he had with the *Abraham Lincoln*. The delay, at least, gave us time to formulate a plan.

And don't get me wrong, it was a magnificently stupid plan. But we brainstormed the crap out of that son of a bitch, and it was the legit best we could do. The next time the *Nautilus* hit the ocean surface to taunt its prey, we were going to sneak off in the rowboat and hope like hell the other ship would take us as prisoners, so we could brief them on the *Nautilus*'s full capabilities and convince them to get the hell out of Dodge.

Would Nemo chase them down and sink them regardless? Would the other ship just run us over without bothering to scoop us up? Yeah,

probably, on both counts. But the *bad* news was that that impending storm was already blowing full-steam on the ocean's surface, and the *Nautilus* was luring its pursuer directly into it, so we would most likely just drown before anyone saw us out there, anyway.

As I said, it was a god-awful fucking plan.

We snuck out like a bunch of submarine ninjas, past the steering bubble thing, where I could hear Nemo ranting—possibly to keep his crew riled up, or possibly just alone, into the void.

"I'm the law, I'm the tribunal! I'm the oppressed, and there are my oppressors! Thanks to them, I've witnessed the destruction of everything I loved, cherished, and venerated—homeland, wife, children, father, and mother! There lies everything I hate! Aaaaaaaaargh!"

We made it to the central companionway without being seen, where stairs led to the platform where the rowboat was in its little airlock thing, then on up to the roof. Ned insisted that even if we didn't time our escape quite right, we could still launch the boat upside down underwater, and the air trapped inside it would pull us up to the surface. Then getting the whole thing turned over and ourselves on top of it during an actual hurricane would be "a bit rough going but not impossible in the technical sense of the term." So I was definitely looking forward to that.

As we debated the fine points, I could feel the ship level off, and the sound of waves crashing against the hull meant that the *Nautilus* had surfaced. This was our chance.

I turned to Ned. "Are we doing this?"

"That ship will sink before nightfall," he said, "and if I'm to perish, I'd just as soon perish on it, or alongside."

Fair enough. "Conseil? As Master wishes?"

"As Master wishes," he agreed.

I bolted for the steps, with Ned and Conseil right on my heels, and took the stairs two at a time up toward the rowboat—

And was launched from the railing with a violent jolt of electricity, hitting the iron deck below like a sack of bricks. Ned landed just to my left, and Conseil plopped right on top of him.

As I flopped involuntarily, I threw back my head to spot Rando Johnson at the control panel against the wall, having just done whatever he had to do to electrify the stairway.

"Et fucking tu, Rando?" I sputtered—I don't think it came out even vaguely intelligible, but at that point, it didn't really matter. I tried to regain locomotion and slid about two feet across the floor—either the ship was diving again, and picked up speed, or being electrocuted had *really* messed me up.

Or *both*? Three crewmen came to haul off Ned, a fourth came for Conseil, and a fifth came for me. By then, though, I was certain that the ship was diving, and fast. Suddenly we tilted back upward, at what must have been something close to top speed...

Oh, no.

With a crash, the whole room lurched, and I was thrown against the front wall, hard. I managed to pull my wiggly, tingly ass off the floor and half-ran, half-stumbled down the hall to the library, tripping and getting a face full of floor-rivets three entirely separate times along the way.

Captain Nemo stood there, alone, staring out the big, bay window. Outside, bathed in the glow of the *Nautilus*'s electric floodlights, maybe thirty feet away, the opposing ship was actively sinking. Water rushed into a gaping hole in its side where our horn had punctured it, and the sea was thick with bodies—some swam desperately for the surface, toward the frantic hope of a rescue that would never come. Others writhed on deck or found themselves stuck in the rigging.

The *Nautilus* was descending into the depths alongside them—and keep in mind that the submarine didn't just dive at the pull of a switch. Somewhere in the engine room, someone was carefully pumping just the right amount of seawater into our ballast tanks so that we would keep pace with the warship, *specifically so Nemo could stand here and watch these people drown*.

I felt my stomach heave and puked up an entire 5-course fancy breakfast all over the library floor.

Chapter XX.

THE LAST WORDS OF CAPTAIN NEMO.

Fuck it. I had come into this book puking, and I would leave it exactly the same way. I ducked through the door that attached the library to my stateroom and cleaned myself up at the sink in my bathroom, clutching the heavy porcelain basin until I was sure that I wasn't going to start heaving again.

My bathroom—somewhere along the way, somehow, I had started to think about the Nautilus as home. I know it sounds stupid, because even insanely long, boring-as-hell old-ass books like Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea end eventually. But I don't know—compared to the last two, this whole journey had seemed pretty relaxed and comfortable, at least until the whale murder and suffocation parts.

And right up until that day—until the ACTUAL MASS EXECUTION OF HUMAN SAILORS—I think part of me hoped I could just chill on that ship, looking at cool underwater bullshit and vacationing on beaches and stuff forever. If I was trapped in fucking *books* for the rest of my life, this one would surely be cozier than the awful crap that was doubtlessly next on the reading list. And, I don't know, if the story ended with Aronnax submarining off into the sunset, maybe I could have gone along with it? The Oz book had tried to shuffle me off to Auntie Em's farm afterward, and I'm pretty sure if I had let it, I would still be in some black and white dustbowl version of Depression-era Kansas.

I know it sounds pathetic, but I guess when your actual hopes and dreams are completely shot to hell, you latch onto whatever sad-ass vision of the future you can salvage. Of course, then Nemo had to go and be a mass motherfucking murderer and ruin *everything*. When I stepped back into the library, the windows had been closed, and the lights were out. The

stench of my own vomit stung my nostrils, but I was over it. The door next to mine, which led to Nemo's room, was cracked, and I could hear sobbing coming from inside.

Jesus Christ. FUCK. THAT. GUY.

I kicked the door open. "You know what, asshole? You don't get to shed mournful tears for people when YOU'RE THE ONE WHO KILLED THEM."

Nemo was on his knees beneath a portrait of a woman with two small children that had been hung beneath Washington and Lincoln since the last time I was in the room. He continued sobbing, not acknowledging my presence in any way.

"Oh, great," I said. "Hey, you know who else probably had innocent wives and children? HALF THE MOTHERFUCKERS ON THAT BOAT. I fucking *saw* you back there! You *did* that monstrous thing, and you *liked* it."

He continued ignoring me.

"Okay, enough with the bullshit! Are you one of *them*? Are you one of the assholes who abducted me and took me from my family and trapped me in stupid fucking *books*?" I was screaming now. "Do you *work* for them? Just TELL ME!"

"O almighty God!" he blubbered. "Enough! Enough!"

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh! He was useless. I can't believe I ever thought of that guy as my *made-up submarine Dad*. I left him to his sobbing and went to find my friends.

They weren't in their cabin—in fact, the ship was utterly deserted. Had the crewmen brought Ned and Conseil into the bowels of the *Nautilus*, to the secret rooms they disappeared into from time to time? On a hunch, I checked the jail and was pleased to discover that the impenetrable wall-panel thing we could never get to budge while we were locked there was just a regular *door* from the outside. It wasn't even locked.

The room flooded with light from the hallway, and inside was Conseil on Ned's lap, his head resting on the bigger man's shoulder. They were both fully clothed, but the scene was intimate as all hell, and neither of them made any move to separate when they saw me.

"Professor!" Ned said. "You've come to our rescue!"

"Uh, am I *interrupting*?" The pair of them just looked at me. "Are you two ready to get the fuck off this submarine?"

"If Master believes the weather will permit it, and that we're within rowing distance of any shore, I shall defer to his judgment," Conseil said, gently disentangling himself from Ned.

"Rough weather or no, a lengthy run in the *Nautilus's* nimble longboat doesn't scare me," Ned said. "For my own part, I'm more than ready."

The *Nautilus* was racing along at 25-miles-per-hour, which seemed like a breakneck pace to both my companions, but I've beat that speed with a fucking *learner's permit*, so whatever. Also, it was currently scooting along the ocean surface, so this was probably the best shot we were going to get. As we reached the main companionway, we could hear crewmen running about in the hallways, shouting various unintelligible things back and forth.

"If they catch us, I'll defend myself," Ned said. "I'll fight to the death."

"Then we'll die together, Ned my friend," Conseil said. Before I could stop him, he leaped onto the stairway and grabbed the railing. Fortunately, this time there was no electric shock.

"I'm the smallest among us, and therefore the easiest to carry in the event that the current was still live," Conseil said with a just the slightest hint of a smile.

The rowboat was mounted against the wall, next to a hatch that would open to launch it out to sea. We could open the hatch manually, but the mechanism to release the boat was at the main console at the bottom of the stairs, and none of us knew how to work it. Fortunately, Ned had brought a big ol' monkey wrench specifically for this task and set about loosening the bolts that affixed the little boat to the big one. Conseil and I got the side hatch open and were rewarded with a barrage of rainwater coming in sideways, followed by a violent spray of foam from the waves crashing against the hull. It was fucking *nasty* out there.

Beneath us, a stampede of crewman rushed into the room. Damn! Had they spotted our escape attempt? All they had to do was electrify the platform, and we'd be utterly boned. They ran right past us, however, frantically repeating a single word for which there was apparently no direct translation in Sumbarinish:

"Maelstrom! Maelstrom!"

Awwwwwww, shit.

Craning my neck out of the side hatch, I could see that the *Nautilus* was caught in the edge of a massive, oceanic whirlpool. Which I guess is the literal definition of the word "maelstrom," but whatever—I'm not a fucking

boat person. In any event, if Nemo's giant, metal death machine couldn't escape that current, there was certainly no chance in hell that our tiny rowboat could.

The question was, *did I even want it to?*

"Get in the skiff!" Ned yelled. "It will protect us from the shock if they electrify the gangway!" He was already on it, and Conseil and I clambered onboard alongside him.

Now loosened, the boat rattled and shifted a few inches underneath us. "We've got to hold on tight," Ned said, "and screw the nuts down again! If we can stay attached to the *Nautilus*, we can still make it—"

Before he could even finish, with a metallic creak, the nuts gave way and the rowboat was torn out of its socket and hurled out into the midst of the vortex with the three of us inside. We all smacked against the railing hard and crumbled to the floor. I pulled myself up into a crouch, but Ned and Conseil remained where they lay, unconscious.

It was probably for the best. Assuming this book just didn't end in us all dying—not that I had any reason to believe that it didn't—I'd rather they think I was just washed out to sea than witness what was about to happen.

When I left that motherfucking Wizard at the end of my first trip, he was piloting his balloon through the twisters, screaming his fool head off about finding the people who abducted him and making them pay. At the time, I thought he was nuts. I chose life over revenge and swan-dived into the tornado that, because of a stupid flashing neon sign I caught a glimpse of inside, I was certain would take me back home.

It *didn't*, though. It just brought me to another, *even worse* book. And now I got it. I understood that Wizard asshole's rage-madness, and I was right fucking there with him.

A giant whirlpool was more or less an enormous, underwater tornado, and I hung over the edge of the rowboat and stared into that motherfucker. I didn't see any flashing neon—just a dark, featureless void. Which suited me fine, because I didn't *want* to be transported to some other god-awful voyage through literature. I wanted the idiot Wizard's dying words to mean what I thought they meant, and for the maelstrom to take me somewhere where I could confront my captors, get some answers, and punch them in their dumb fucking faces.

Our little boat was tipped at an angle, dipped over the edge of the whirlpool and being swept around its massive rim with incredible speed. If I

really tried, it looked like I could get some pretty good air, and not hit water until at least forty or fifty feet into the darkness.

I jumped with every ounce of strength my rage could give me, and tumbled, screaming, into the void.

Chapter XXI.

THE HATCH.

I'm not sure what I really *expected* to happen, but after blacking out for the briefest moment, I found myself sitting in a very comfortable chair in a big, fancy room. There was a lit fireplace in the corner, and expensive-looking, antiquey crap everywhere. Also, eight or ten people (who fit the same general description as the furniture) were sitting in a circle in front of me, staring expectantly.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I screamed.

"Sir?" One of the people said. They were all white men, aged from 30 or so up to probably a hundred. "Is... something *wrong*?"

Had I missed the hatch entirely, and woke up in the final scene of the book where Aronnax had to tell the story of his crappy submarine adventure at some terrible dinner party? Fuck that! "I have to get *back there*!" I said. "To the maelstrom! Where's Conseil? Where's Ned Land? He'll know where to find—"

"What *maelstrom*?" one of the white guys asked. He was youngish with red hair and was definitely a tool. "And what could it possibly have to do with *traveling through time*?"

Traveling through...? Fuuuuck. "No," I said. "No, no no no no."

In between me and the others was an octagon-shaped table, and sitting on it was some kind of metal, ivory, and crystal model thing. Which, I will tell you straight up, shattered into a billion pieces when I leaped out of my seat, turned over the table, and went running out of the room.

"Sir!" someone yelled from behind me. I didn't turn back. In the hallway, I saw a mirror mounted on the wall, and I rushed toward it, terrified at what I might find.

Sure as shit, reflected back at me wasn't Professor Aronnax, but an entirely different middle-aged white guy. With fucking *sideburns*.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" *I was in the next book*. I was in the god-damned *Time Machine*, obviously, which I was pretty sure was also by one of those Jules Verne or H. G. Wells assholes. I had actually seen the movie of this one—it was going to make me chase Jack the Ripper into 1980s New York and eat McDonald's Big Macs or something. Did they even *know* about Big Macs in century-old public domain times? Some of that might have been made up for the film. Still, the Wizard had said there was an escape hatch in the maelstrom, and now that I had lost my only chance to—

Wait. *No*. He had said that there was an escape hatch in *every book*. I yanked the mirror off the wall and threw it to the floor where it also shattered quite spectacularly (because, I don't know, *fuck those sideburns*), and bolted for the next door down the hall. It turned out to be a bathroom, but I kept going until I had searched most of the first floor of that giant, stupid house, and finally found what must have been the workshop. Inside was a massive, metal, ivory, and crystal monstrosity that looked just like the model I had trashed in the other room but was big enough to climb inside and had a *chair* right in the middle of it.

I wasn't sure where you would put an escape hatch inside a book called *The Time Machine*, but wherever it was, I was willing to bet you could get to it with A MOTHERFUCKING TIME MACHINE.

I jumped inside and found two levers with a convenient panel between them that displayed the date and time. It had two big, ornate knobs underneath it. I sat there for a second, trying to decide what my best bet was, hatch-wise. The beginning of time? The *end* of it?

Actually, fuck that shit. I set the knobs for April 15th, 2017, at 10:04 a.m., and pushed the lever on the right to full-throttle. A kaleidoscope of light erupted around me because time-traveling apparently looks exactly like bad digital effects. A wind kicked up from somewhere, but only blew for maybe ten seconds before the laser light show faded out to reveal the interior of a familiar-looking, ugly-ass store. Smack dab in the middle of the Calabasas Mall. *Near the food court*.

Holy crap. I was *home*.

At the rear wall, the sexy librarian-looking woman was closing the big, garish door labeled "EDUTAINMENT," and I caught a glimpse of a girl in a black hoodie stepping inside as she did. Was this the *exact moment I had left*?

The saleslady turned around to see the girl she thought she had just hoodwinked, climbing out of an ornate metal *time machine*, and screamed. She glanced frantically to her left and to her right, possibly contemplating escape routes, then turned back to the edutainment door just in time to see it crash open with a flash of blue light. Inside was a rush of dust and wind and debris as if the thing had opened up directly into a raging hurricane. Compared to all the other catastrophic weather events I had endured recently, though, this one was weirdly quiet.

Then, out of the storm, hair whipping around like crazy, stepped a perfect doppelganger of *me*. Followed, for some reason, by *my best friend Madeline*. The sales lady screamed a second time and pushed past both of them, diving through the open door and tumbling into the hurricane.

"Ha!" the other me exclaimed. "I *told* you!" Her eyes lit up. "Oh, shit— *the mall*. Come on! I would kill some motherfuckers for a corn dog right now."

Madeline gave her a tiny punch on the shoulder. "Shut up, we have to at least *talk to her*."

"Why?" the other me asked. "I already know what she does. I already *did it.*"

I just stood there with my mouth hanging open like an idiot. Madeline rushed forward and tackled me in a big hug that lasted roughly a thousand years. "Hey," she said, at last, giving me her big, friendly dork smile as she finally let go of me.

"Hey," I said, not bothering to hold back the tears.

"You did it," Madeline said. "We did it. We're back at the beginning before any of it even happened."

I was still having trouble forming words. "I know you've been worried about us," she said, "but I'm *fine*. And your *mom* is fine. All your worries about us having to mourn you, because you were mysteriously, randomly abducted from the mall never even *happen*. Whatever you choose to do next, we're *okay*."

I looked at her, and at the other me, and at the open edutainment door with the storm raging in the other side. "Wait," I said. "What do you mean *choose*?"

"You can just come home with us!" Madeline said. "I mean, there will be two of you, but we'll figure something out. Or you can, I don't know—take all the money in that cash register and go to Europe? Or get back in the

time machine and visit somewhere great? You're not trapped in *anything*. The future is up to *you*."

The other me was at the front counter, waving an empty, black plastic money tray at me. "There's no money in this cash register, BT-dubs," she said.

"Or you can go looking for your answers," Madeline said. "The point is, it's your call. And you don't have to worry about the people who love you, because we'll be right here, waiting, when you're done."

It was all too much. I felt like months and months worth of crushing weight had been suddenly lifted, and dreams that I had long since given up on had suddenly, miraculously, come true. Then again, there was still all that *rage*. Part of me wanted to just sit and talk to Madeline for hours, to tell her everything I had been through—and find out what the whole deal was with Amber Maldonaldo, now that I thought about it.

But the other part of still wanted to know what the fuck the past six months of my life had even been about.

Also, there was the issue of my clone to deal with. What would life even be like, with two Arabellas? Would one of us have to hide in the attic whenever the other one was out doing stuff? Would we have to keep the whole business hidden from my mom? She had discovered the cat I secretly adopted and hid in my bedroom when I was ten after about forty-five minutes, so I didn't have a ton of faith we'd be able to keep the charade up for any length of time.

I shot a glance at the other Arabella, who was half slumped over the front counter and rolling her eyes aggressively. To be honest, she seemed like a little bit of an asshole.

"Come oooooon," she groaned, absolutely proving my point. "We all know what you're going to do. And you'd better do it fast, because once the stupid tornado dies down, you lose your chance forever."

I glared at her, then gave Madeline another quick hug. "See you soon," I said, my voice cracking as I did.

"See you sooner," she whispered into my ear.

Then I took a running leap into the open door, and for the second time in the same day—or possibly like a century and a half apart, but whatever—hurled myself into the unknown.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

I thanked a whole bunch of people in the endnotes of the original editions of these books, and you can consider them all still thanked: Dawn Marie Pares one thousand million times, because she is basically the reason I even do all this. Mona Finden for the covers, which still amaze me every time I look at them. Okay, buckle up, because here comes the laundry list: Scott Gable, Susan Roth, Melodie Ladner, Dawn Vogel, Penni Harris Jones, Lindy West, Stephen Colbert for some reason, Ryan North, and Mindi Welton-Mitchell (alas, if you want details on the specific nature of my gratitude toward any of these folks you're going to have to dig up the original books, but I assure you that they are all wonderful people and if you ever see any of them on the street you should tell them I said that.). Also a special shout-out to the places where I wrote huge chunks of this series: Firehouse Coffee, Grumpy D's, and the Ballard Public Library. I pray to Satan that they're all still there after this whole global pandemic shitshow is behind us.

Uuuuuuugh.

So you might have noticed that the books here are titled a little differently than when they were first released. It's part of a rebranding, and the individual novels are getting the name change, too. There's a story there, but it boils down to the fact that when you're your own publisher you can absolutely hire top-notch people to edit and illustrate and format and make your book every bit as good as anything else on the market. But you really can't hire someone to convince you that, no matter how much you love it at the time, *The "Wonderful" Wizard of Futhermucking Oz* is just a god-awful title. Mostly because even though you think switching two letters in the word "motherfucking" makes it perfectly harmless, when you try to run ads for the Kindle edition Amazon is going to give you a hard nope, which... well, you can see where I'm going with this.

I will always be forever grateful to "futhermucking," though, because trying to justify that title gave me the scene in the first book where Arabella attempts to teach the Scarecrow how to curse, which is maybe my single favorite thing in the entire series.

Also, the changes completely fixed the title of book two! As I was originally writing *Arabella Grimsbro*, *Warlord of Mars*, I stumbled across a book called *Arabella of Mars* by David D. Levine and had an existential crisis which led me to remove the word "Arabella" from my cover to avoid confusing anyone. And instead I confused EVERYONE because *A. Grimsbro*, *Warlord of Mars* is somehow an even shittier title than *The* "*Wonderful*" *Wizard of Futhermucking Oz* and I'm tired of trying to explain to people what "a Grimsbro" is. So now all three book titles start with "Arabella Grimsbro," which is better for branding anyway, and David D. Levine can suck it.

Again, though, the initial clusterfuck gave me the running gag where Arabella couldn't remember John Carter's name, which was also a pretty good bit.

Which leads us to book three. Can I tell you how many public domain classics I went through before finally settling on 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea? The book was almost Alice in Wonderland, and then Frankenstein, and Jane Eyre (with Arabella initially thinking she was in Pride and Prejudice, which would have been MUCH more pleasant for her). But I wanted to stay in the realm of sci-fi/fantasy, and the first two novels were portal stories, which brought me BACK to Wonderland, and then to A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (which I still think would make a pretty great Arabella book). The Time Machine was also in the mix, of course. Ultimately, though, 20,000 Leagues let Arabella work through a lot of her abandonment issues with her new surrogate Submarine Dad, and gave her an arc that felt satisfying to me if the series ended as a trilogy. And with Arronax being whisked away to an exotic underwater dreamscape, it's sort of a portal fantasy. Anyway, I think it was the right choice.

Which, of course, brings us to that ending. Obviously, I wanted a way to give Arabella her happy ending while still leaving the door (literally) open for more books just in case I ever got the chance to write them. And your mileage may vary, but for me, it works. Because more than actually finding answers to the MANY plot mysteries I left dangling, Arabella's happily-ever-after was always about getting home to her Mom and Madeline. And now, at least in my heart, she can do both (thanks, time travel! May you

always be there when I need you, you gorgeous, contrived, hacky, plot-fixing son of a bitch!).

So what's the deal? Are there ever going to be any more of these things? I don't know, maybe. I have more in mind, and regardless of which adventures Arabella is forced to endure (I love you *Connecticut Yankee*!), I know exactly how the second trilogy ends, and how all those mysteries play out. Also maybe a third trilogy that explains what Madeline has been up to the whole time? I would honestly keep writing these things forever if they sold.

And the Arabella books have always sold *really* well at conventions, but not at all online (partly because Amazon doesn't have a category for "public domain novels but rewritten as modern YA and also utterly bursting with profanity," and partly because THEY WON'T LET ME ADVERTISE THEM). So if you want to read more of these as much as I want to write them, you can do two things: 1) Go review the first ones on Amazon (search under the new titles), and 2) sign up for my author newsletter at youngmark.com. Please, please, *please* sign up for my author newsletter at youngmark.com? There aren't any more conventions these days, and I'm not sure if there really will be again, at least on the same scale. Which means that my entire writing career depends on figuring out how to reach people over the internet.

That came across maybe a little more desperate than intended, which was, I don't know, *medium* desperate? Anyway, thank you all so much for being on this ride with me.

Grimsbro forever!

-Matt

ABOUT THE AUTHORS.

MATT YOUNGMARK is the creator of the *Chooseomatic Books* series, the comic strip *Conspiracy Friends*, and the *Robot the Robot* books for young readers. He lives in Seattle, and has been claiming that his next project will be a humorous fantasy series titled *Spellmonkeys* for basically YEARS now.

Matt's next project will be a humorous fantasy series titled *Spellmonkeys*. If you'd like to call him out on his bullshit, sign up for his author newsletter at www.youngmark.com.

L. FRANK BAUM is the author of 55 books (including 14 set in the land of Oz) and a number of stage plays. He was well-known in the early 20th century as a supporter of women's suffrage. Which sounds great, until you run across the two editorials he wrote in 1890 for the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* in which he explicitly called for the genocide of Native Americans.

So, as Arabella would say, fuck that guy.

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS is the author of more than 50 books, most notably the *Tarzan of the Apes* series. The early Barsoom stories were his very first published works. He was born in 1875 in Chicago, and his father had fought in the Civil War, so I guess all the romanticizing of Virginia plantation life makes sense in that context. Also, it looks like he was pretty into eugenics? Like, just as a concept?

Whatever, dude.

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE was born in 1859 and wrote something like 50 books. His record on race was... mixed? Like, in "The Yellow Face" (yikes), the face in question is actually a yellow mask worn by a biracial African American girl from Georgia, which Sherlock Holmes was super chill with even though interracial marriage wouldn't be legal in the States for another 75 years. Racist tropes do populate various other stories,

though, so perhaps Conan Doyle was marginally less racist than most British imperialists of his time, which is to say still pretty racist.

He also fervently believed in Spiritualism and traipsed all over the globe falling for every supernatural hoax he encountered while his best friend Harry Houdini tried to talk sense into him, and if no one is currently developing a Netflix series based on this premise I don't even know why we HAVE prestige television.

JULES VERNE is the author of 80 novels, the entire lot of which includes approximately zero memorable women and at least one vile anti-semitic caricature. He is credited with co-creating science fiction (along with H.G. Wells, who he despised). Verne died in 1905, and his grave features a marble statue of him, hella buff, busting out from beneath the capstone, zombie-style.

So that part's actually kind of rad.

MORE FROM MATT YOUNGMARK

ARABELLA GRIMSBRO

Arabella Grimsbro and the "Wonderful" Wizard
Arabella Grimsbro, Warlord of Mars
Arabella Grimsbro Twenty Thousand Leagues Below

CHOOSEOMATIC BOOKS

Zombocalypse Now
Thrusts of Justice
Time Travel Dinosaur

CHOOSEOMATIC MINIS

<u>U, Robot</u>

CONSPIRACY FRIENDS

Clandestine Maneuvers in the Dark
The Weird Turn Pro
Hot Vatican Nights

FOR EARLY READERS

Robot the Helper Robot
Robot the Delivery Robot
Robot the Investigator Robot
Robot the Teaching Robot

www.youngmark.com